

BROKEN FLAMES



MK AHEARN

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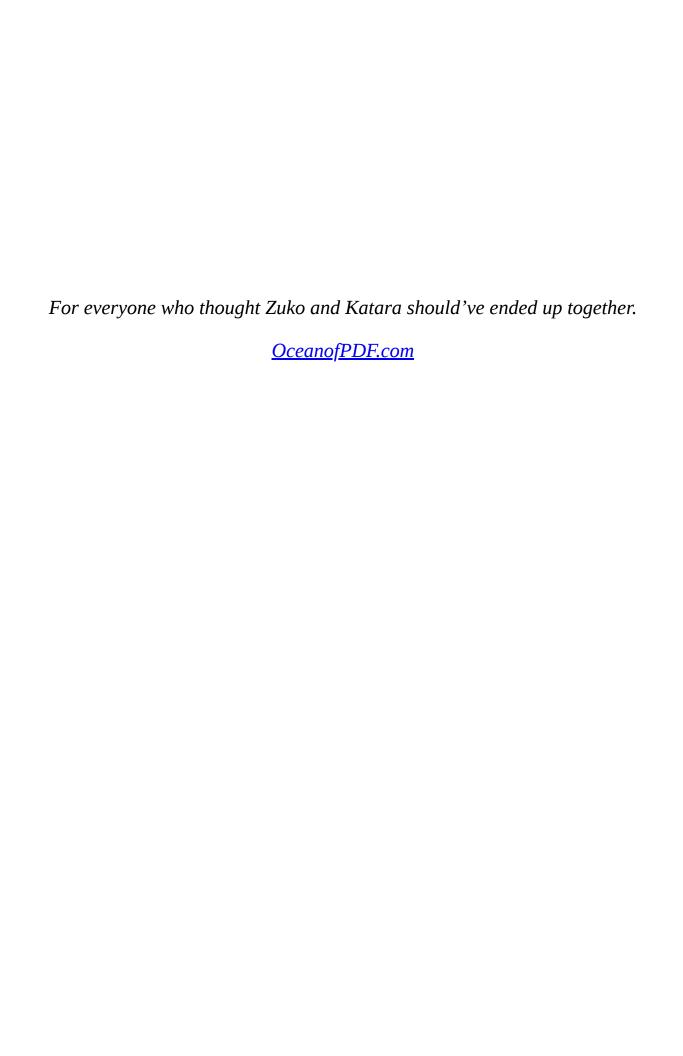
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TRIGGER WARNINGS

This book contains swearing, sexually explicit scenes, violence, assault, and death of parents. Please keep this in mind when reading this story.



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PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

Goddesses

Mavalu: Mah-vah-loo

Aeris: Air-us

Odaesia: Oh-day- juh

Isleen: Is-leen

KINGDOMS

Luheo: Loo-he-oh **Abelon:** Ab-ah-lon **Morwen:** More-win **Zetron:** Zeh-tron

Capital Cities Morya: More-yah Alua: Ah-loo-ah Gralar: Grah-lar Raden: Rah-den

DRAGONS AND SERPENTS

Imry: Im-ree
Veros: Vah-roh-s
Nondaar: None-dah-r
Elios: Eel-ee-oh-s
Talay: Tay-lay

CONTENTS

- 1. Koraine
- 2. Koraine
- 3. Bellamy
- 4. Koraine
- 5. Koraine
- 6. Bellamy
- 7. Koraine
- 8. Bellamy
- 9. Koraine
- 10. Bellamy
- 11. Koraine
- 12. Bellamy
- 13. Bellamy
- 14. Koraine
- 15. Koraine
- 16. Bellamy
- 17. Koraine
- 18. Bellamy
- 19. Koraine
- 20. Koraine
- 21. Bellamy
- 22. Koraine
- 23. Bellamy
- 24. Koraine
- 25. Bellamy
- 26. Koraine
- 27. Bellamy
- 28. Koraine
- 29. Bellamy
- 30. Koraine
- 31. Koraine
- 32. Bellamy
- 33. Koraine
- 34. Bellamy
- 35. Bellamy
- 36. Koraine
- 37. Bellamy
- 38. Koraine

Acknowledgments

Warring Tides
Also by MK Ahearn

KORAINE



his far out on the rocks, water sprayed my face as each wave crashed against the rough edges of the stone path jutting out to sea. I sat on my blanket watching as the sun rose, painting the sky a mix of orange and pink. Three large sea stacks poked out of the water in the distance, their rugged shape formed from years of erosion.

When I was young, I dreamed of swimming out to them and climbing to the very top to catch a glimpse of the rest of the world.

A small sound behind me caught my attention, forcing my gaze away from the sea. I called on the water, an orb forming in the palm of my hand. A white bird was perched on a nearby rock, pecking at the cracks.

I enjoyed the peaceful solitude on days like this, needing space to work through my thoughts. No one would bother me out here.

Relaxing my shoulders, I let the orb of water splash to the ground.

A small pool of water, stuck in the rocks, sat beside me. The little ripples spreading across the surface showed a reflection of my face. My pale blue eyes almost matched the hues of the sea water and strands of loose hair fell over them as I glanced down. I inherited my mother's hair, the color as white as the snow that covered our kingdom during winter. I looked similar to both of my parents, inheriting my father's complexion, a beautiful tan which I could attribute to our Morwenian heritage.

The sun was almost fully up and a small rush of panic crept through me, realizing my father would soon be looking for me. A new wave rolled toward the rocks faster than the others. The closer it got, I noticed two horns poking up through it.

Talay's head broke through the surface of the water, his beady black eyes connecting with mine. I smiled, knowing the sea serpent was checking on me as worry crept in. Our connection ran deeper than just giving the serpent simple commands. Bonds were formed when learning to ride a sea serpent and it became an instinct, another sense.

The beast tilted his head, as if to ask if I were alright.

"I'm okay, go catch yourself some fish," I nodded to the serpent, wishing I could join him on his back.

Someday I would ride on Talay across the sea and visit the other kingdoms for myself. I'd always been confined to the safety of Morwen, the large kingdom built of those with water abilities. I longed to see more, but the world was too dangerous to travel with Abelon always seeking excuses to invade other kingdoms. They were an unforgiving kingdom built of flames, hungry for more power and resources.

He dove under the surface, swimming off down the coast. Talay was the runt of the sea serpents he'd been raised with, small, but just as ferocious as the others. It didn't slow him down either. I watched his blue scales catching the sunlight as he quickly put distance between us.

I wasn't surprised the serpent had been affected by my growing worry.

A letter had arrived from the palace a few days prior, calling all the nobles to a meeting. Every few months, the nobles would travel to the capital city of Alua, and meet with the king, to advise him on the kingdom and its needs. My father was one of these nobles and usually made the journey alone, but when the letter came this time it was not the same as it typically was.

This time, the letter had requested my father to bring me.

I'd only been to the palace once before, and no matter how many possibilities I ran through, I couldn't find a single reason the king would want me there again.

The small blanket I'd set out on the cold surface of the rocks bunched in my arms as I gathered it up. I hurried back toward the cliffside at my back. With any luck, I would make it home just before my father returned from his early morning training.

My father was a nobleman, but before he was awarded this title he served as one of the king's most trusted generals. All Morwenians recognized the name General Neroe, famous for winning a crucial battle during the last war we fought against Abelon. He sacrificed himself as a

distraction during the Battle of Gila so his men could advance, saving the outlier island from being taken prisoner, and killing an entire portion of Abelon's army. His name was known across all four kingdoms

Even an injury couldn't keep him far from the warriors for long. He spent his mornings helping train the recruits of the king's army. Selfishly, I wished he would slow down and not push himself too hard. War had a way of making one cling tight to the ones they loved.

I found the small opening in the cliffside and slipped through sideways.

The path was narrow and dark. Within the confines of the tunnel walls, the temperature dropped significantly, and I could feel the cool dampness brush my skin. I pushed on, knowing the quicker I made it through the less I would feel trapped inside. It took me a total of ten minutes to reach the other end. Anyone else would have taken double the time, but I'd done this a million times before.

Exiting, I began the short route home. I walked close to the cliffside that lined the water. Large properties, where nobles resided, lined the top of the cliff and overlooked the sea . Beyond these homes, further down the dirt road I followed, were the smaller homes, apartments, and shops on the outskirts of the capital. My mother's small shop was among these. She ran a small apothecary, providing remedies to the ill.

I used to enjoy visiting and helping at the little stone shop covered in ivy, but I didn't go as often anymore. My mother worked less these days as an illness slowed her down. None of the healers she'd seen could figure out what was eating away at her life. Some days she was fine and others she slept all day. Fate was cruel, my mother dedicating her life to healing others, but unable to heal herself.

I worked my way up the small hill that rose as I continued my walk home. This was the last stretch of road before my house. I could just spot the light grey stone and wooden door as they appeared over the hill, From where I stood, I couldn't tell if my father had returned home yet. The candles he lit in the windows in the early morning were extinguished.

Hoisting my skirt high, I ran the rest of the way up the hill, anxious to get back. It had rained the night before, and the ground was still slightly wet from the summer storm. A slick spot of mud almost tripped me and I slowed my pace. The cool morning breeze tickled the skin showing between my skirt and matching top.

I made it to the front door, reaching for the handle and hesitated. My nerves started to creep in as I anticipated my father coming home, and needing to leave for the palace. The closer it came to leaving for the palace, the more my nerves grew.

With a deep breath, I pushed the door easily open. The creaking of the door was the only sound I heard as I stepped inside.

Trying to stay light on my feet I tiptoed, avoiding the floorboards I knew would make noise if I put my weight on them. If I was quiet enough, no one would realize I slipped out before sunrise. Right as my foot met the first step that would lead me up to my room, I heard someone clear their throat from the kitchen.

I stumbled on the first step and turned myself toward the sound.

"Koraine?" my father called out from the kitchen.

I let out a defeated sigh, all of my hopes for sneaking back in unseen were gone.

"You're home?" I asked, approaching my father hesitantly.

"I am. I decided I should be home today before we leave for the palace, so I sent Emmett to oversee things today. Imagine my surprise when I found my daughter was missing," he said raising an eyebrow.

My older brother, Emmett, was always begging to tag along with my father, in hopes of someday serving as a warrior himself. No one expected him to serve, after all our father gave, and yet he still wouldn't drop the idea. Soon my younger brother, Caspian, would start trying to join as well.

"I'm sorry-" I began, but he held up a hand.

"Koraine, you know what is on the line today, the king has summoned us. We cannot risk being late, and I certainly cannot risk showing up without you by my side."

He shook his head in disappointment. Sometimes I wished he would yell at me, and get angry. This disappointment just made my heart crack. I knew I'd let him down. His loyalty to the king ran deeper than any other ties he had. He was a perfect general and advisor, but sometimes he forgot his children were not one of his men.

"I was only visiting the water," I tried, hoping he would realize he was worried for no reason. I never would've missed our summons.

"Did you take Talay?" he asked, eyeing me skeptically.

"Talay followed me out there," I answered. My father worried too much.

Most of the warriors in our kingdom had their own sea serpent, raised and bred by the palace. The only reason I'd been gifted one was because the king gifted my father's children each with their own as a sign of his gratitude following the war.

"What if you had lost track of time or injured yourself out on those rocks? The king expects you at the palace today. Do you realize what an honor that is?"

Sighing, I already knew this was a pointless argument. His mind was already set that I'd been reckless.

"Yes," I said, lowering my gaze to the ground.

My father made his way over to me, standing from the chair he was seated in. He easily towered over me by at least a foot. A calloused hand rested on my shoulder and he let out a small sigh.

"You know I just worry about you," he said, his voice filled with warm concern. "I don't know what I would do if something happened to you."

The statement surprised me a little. I tilted my head, unsure how to answer. I knew how to protect myself. My father had always ensured I knew how to control water, almost equivalent to the warriors he trained. Why would anything happen to me?

"I'll be alright," I tried to assure him. With a small nod, he walked away to clean up his breakfast.

As he reached for a glass of water, his arm flinched in an almost unnatural movement, knocking it over. I used my abilities to catch the water from spilling everywhere and guided it into the glass that my father had already fixed. This had been happening more frequently since he returned from war. A side effect of the grave injury he'd sustained to his arm while saving his men. He'd almost lost the limb completely, but the healers managed to fix it the best they could.

"Go clean up, we'll leave for the palace soon," he said without even glancing at me. His shoulders sunk inward, and he set back to work using his own water abilities to rinse off his utensils from breakfast.

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I PLAYED with the two braids framing my face, trying to get them to sit perfectly. A frustrated grumble escaped my lips as I glanced in my vanity

mirror again. The braids were uneven, and one had little strands of hair escaping. I could feel myself growing nervous with every passing minute. My father's words kept playing through my head, reminding me of the honor I'd received to be invited to the palace.

I'd only met King Kaito Belizere once before as a young girl. I'd stood at my mother's side as the king presented my father with honors and rewards following war. I remembered being so excited in the presence of the king and queen, obsessing over the fancy crown the queen wore, and staring wide eyed with wonder as the king addressed us all.

This time was different. There was more at stake now. The king had the power to make anyone's greatest dreams come true, or ruin their lives in a matter of seconds. The older I got, the more I understood this. The world could be a cruel place. I'd seen noble families stripped of their titles, watched families torn apart by war, and unfortunate individuals cast into poverty all within seconds. Ever since the war the king ruled with less mercy and compassion, and more of an iron fist.

If I wasn't careful today, that could be us. One wrong move, like being late, and the king could make our lives miserable. I'd keep quiet and let my father do all the talking. I was simply going to observe and fulfill a request, nothing more. We'd be home before supper, and I'd be back in this room laughing to myself over how nervous I'd been for no reason.

A knock on my door snapped me out of deep thought. Turning from my vanity, I found Caspian standing in my doorway, arms crossed and leaning against the frame. Even like this, he towered over me. He was starting to look more like an older brother rather than younger.

"Come to see me off?" I asked teasingly. I'd always been closer with Caspian than I had with Emmett. We were only ten months apart in age.

Emmett was all focus, and no time for fun. It was always Caspian and I getting into trouble when we were younger. He used to come visit the water with me, but he'd stopped in recent years when the idea no longer sounded fun anymore.

"I've come to make sure you've cleaned up so you don't embarrass our family," he said with a grin.

I threw a look of steel his way, scowling so hard I was sure my makeup would smudge. A bit of sparkling powder was painted on my eyelids, bringing out the bright blue of them.

"Screw off," I huffed.

"Oh, come on, Koraine. You know I'm only joking," he said, stalking over to me.

I was fidgeting with the clasp of a silver and blue necklace, trying to get the thing to stay around my neck. My fingers trembled a bit with the reminder that I needed to leave soon.

"I came to see if you were alright," he admitted, grabbing the necklace clasp from me and helping me secure it.

"I'm as okay as I suppose I'll ever be," I shrugged, trying to hide my nerves from him.

The knowing glance I saw flash across his face told me he wasn't buying my lie, but he didn't push. He knew me well enough to know I would never admit it if I was afraid. Growing up with a father who was a general and two brothers, I learned how to put on a brave face.

Still, Caspian knew me just a little better than anyone else.

"I'm sure it's nothing. The king is probably just curious about what Father's one daughter looks like. Maybe he wants you to befriend the princess."

Princess Asena and I were the same age. She barely left the palace and was the king's only heir. By now, I was surprised the king hadn't forced her into marriage yet. She was the right age, and she would need a husband to produce heirs when she inherited the throne.

"Well, in that case, I'm sure we will be home in no time when they realize I'm the worst possible companion for the princess," I chuckled.

Still fiddling with my appearance, I heard my father preparing the horses for our journey outside. My brother's hands grabbed my wrists from behind me, stopping me in my tracks.

"Enough, you look fine," he sighed, his blue eyes staring expectantly at me.

"Fine isn't good enough," I argued.

The faint echo of the door closing below us alerted me that my father had finished the preparations. I knew what came next. He'd call for me soon, and we'd be well on our way to the palace.

"You don't really have a choice," Caspian said, reading my mind. My brother turned, walking out of my room. He paused in the doorway, running a hand through his dark hair.

"You look perfect, don't let those stuck up royals make you think anything less. I'm going for a ride at sea on Elios, but I'll be here when you

get back," he said, leaving for his sea serpent.

It was one of the nicest and only compliments I'd ever received from my brother. If he was being sentimental, then even he must be nervous.

KORAINE



nudged my horse forward as I settled in to the saddle, following my father off of our property. She was a beautiful, all white, thoroughbred I'd affectionately named Milly, but no one else called her that. All of our horses had names I'd given them. I gave up on persuading my father to name them when he'd called it a waste of time.

"How long will the ride to the palace be?" I asked, praying I'd have at least enough time to come to terms with my nerves. The unknown gnawing at me the closer we got and causing me to obsess over each potential outcome.

"It should only take us about an hour to get to the front gates," my father answered.

The large silver gates that marked the palace were well-known in Morwen. They stood tall at twenty feet high and they glistened the way icicles do in the sunlight. Everything in this kingdom seemed to reflect the power that built it. Everywhere I looked I found hues of blue and silver woven into structures. Even the palace was a pale blue color, that from afar almost appeared white.

The capital was built on the edge of the sea, many canals of water running through the city and allowing small boats to travel throughout it. Access to water was vital to my people. We drew our power from it and used it to run our kingdom.

Every kingdom was built and rose to power from abilities gifted by one of the four goddesses. In Morwen, our king was a powerful water manipulator, our gift imparted on us by the goddess Odaesia. It was similar

in Abelon the kingdom of flame, Zetron the kingdom of earth, and Luheo the kingdom of air.

I'd never visited the other kingdoms. My lessons growing up depicted them as a reflection of the abilities that ruled them, the same as Morwen. We had always lived on the brink of war. Kingdoms always seeking more than they had and elements naturally opposing each other. Water and fire could not coexist peacefully, it wasn't in our nature. We only had peace when new agreements were formed, or during the years when rulers bided their time and built their armies to try to invade another kingdom.

"Koraine," my father scolded as I played with a small orb of water in my palm, daydreaming. My horse was slowly drifting off the path. I corrected her, urging her to catch up to my father.

"Will there be food at the palace?" I asked, trying to focus on something other than the reason I may have been summoned.

"I think we have more important things to worry about," my father answered, his features stern. The concerned father from this morning was nowhere to be found now.

I sighed, wishing I had something to snack on while we rode.

My eyes wandered from the road ahead, taking in my surroundings. The vast green lands on each side of me grew long, wispy grass. The wide open land gave me a view of the distant sea. I wondered if Talay was out hunting for lunch in the waves. He had the freedom to roam the coast near my home. There was a cove nearby where most of the sea serpents resided, but each had the freedom to hunt and swim whenever they pleased.

A small bunch of trees came into view as we continued our ride. There was something hanging from the branches, I spotted as we got closer. I pulled Milly off course, urging her toward the trees.

"Koraine, where are you going?" my father shouted, growing more impatient with me by the second. He'd halted his own horse, watching me ride off.

Underneath the trees, I glanced up. Hanging above my head were bunches of purple fruits, their weight pulling the branches down within my reach.

Plums!

"Thank Aeris," I whispered a praise to the earth goddess as my stomach gave a deep growl.

Reaching up, I picked one of the plums off of its branch. I turned the fruit in my hand and took a large bite.

The luscious and mouth watering plum sent my senses into overdrive. The plum was delicious, and not just because I was hungry. I grabbed more plums, placing them in a satchel attached to my saddle and hurried back to my father.

"Was that really necessary?" he asked, arms crossed and glaring at the fruits tucked in my arms.

I held one out to him as a weak apology. With a sigh, he reluctantly accepted it. Shaking his head, he urged his horse forward. Our travels to the palace resumed and Milly trotted to catch up to my father and his horse.

The rest of our journey was spent in silence, and soon I spotted the palace towering over the city in the distance. It wouldn't be long before we were in front of the king.

Entering the city of Alua, Milly's hooves clacked against the cobblestone road. I navigated the horse across a small bridge as my father made a sudden turn. All around us children played near the water. Using their abilities to splash each other with small streams.

I spotted a young girl watching sheepishly from the shadow of a nearby establishment. There was minimal time left until we needed to be at the palace, but I risked a quick stop. I guided Milly toward the child.

The little girl eyed me as I approach. I hopped off of the horse, approaching her and guiding Milly by her reins.

"Why aren't you playing with the others?" I asked.

"I can't control water like them," she said, shyly.

I tried not to let my smile falter, realizing what she meant. There were many people throughout the kingdoms born without abilities.

"Don't let that stop you from having fun," I said with a smile. "I'm sure they would still be happy to play with you."

The young girl smiled, raising her eyes from the ground to meet mine.

"Really?"

Turning back to my saddle, I pulled out a few of the plums I had picked.

"Here, it's a hot day and I bet they would love a refreshing snack," I said, holding out the plums.

"Thank you," the little girl said, grabbing the fruits.

I climbed back onto Milly while watching the girl run off.

"We should really get moving," my father said, startling me. His tone surprisingly gentle. I hadn't expected him to follow me.

"You aren't mad I stopped?"

Glancing from me to the young girl and back, my father just shook his head. He directed his horse toward the palace once more. I followed close behind him.

A group of young women, dressed in elegant blue and silver skirts, passed us giggling. Many of the shops that lined the streets had their doors open, welcoming in guests. Alua was more breathtaking than I remembered, painted in blue and silver and the waterways complimenting every building. The pale cobblestone added a welcoming charm to the city.

"I always forget that you don't get to come here often," my father said, watching me amused. "Maybe we can change that."

I wasn't sure it was possible for my eyes to widen even more, but I could feel my face light up with delight at the offer.

"I'd love that," I said, still in awe.

The next ten minutes were a blur. I tried taking in every detail of the city, mentally taking note of all the little shops I wanted to visit next time I was here. We passed by a market set up in an open square. Merchants were selling fruits, baked goods, meats, and beautiful textiles from little tables they had set up. Customers were bustling through the square, carrying baskets of the goods they'd purchased.

I almost fell from Milly when she came to an abrupt stop a few minutes later, distracted enough by the sights of the city that the outer palace gates surprised me. Seeing them up close was much more intimidating than stories made them sound.

I strained my neck to glance up, trying to spot where the towering gates stopped. The sun was beating down strong, and it was reflecting off the shine of the metal, hurting my eyes. I glanced back down just as the gates began to slowly open.

With the gates fully opened I urged my horse forward. Every muscle in my body went rigid, and I sat up a bit straighter as the eyes of multiple guards tracked us. No one spoke a word to us.

I missed the merry welcome and festivities of the last visit I had to the palace.

Ahead, a group of men were dismounting and passing off their horses' reins to palace workers. I recognized some of the noblemen that lived in

homes near our own, and had served as advisers to the king with my father for years. Some had even been to our home for dinners or celebrations.

My father joined the group, while I remained awkwardly by Milly's side.

"Can I take that from you?" a voice from behind me asked.

I turned, tilting my head.

A young man stood with his head cocked, dressed in the royal blue uniform of the palace. He was waiting for my answer, but I still had no idea what he was referring to.

"Huh?" I questioned.

"The reins, I'll lead your horse to stay in the royal stables while you are here," the man offered kindly.

He was referring to the reins still clenched in my hands. My cheeks turned a vibrant red, and I dropped my gaze to the ground, feeling out of place. All the other horses had already been led off, and mine was the only one remaining. Passing off the reins, I thanked the palace worker and hurried to join the group.

"The king is expecting you all," a shorter man who had appeared atop the palace steps informed us. "You can all follow me now."

I took a deep breath, trying to control my shakiness. Forcing myself to take the first step forward, I followed the rest of the group through the front doors of the palace.

Inside, the palace was extravagant, much of the palette of colors from outside continued inside. The walls were white with blue detailing and decor. A large silver chandelier hung above my hand, the candles placed on it unlit. On either side of me, large pots were filled with white flowers fully in bloom.

White and blue porcelain tiles spread for as long as I could see in every direction. Against one wall, a fountain was built spouting water from a carving of a sea serpent.

Our guide led us up a winding staircase, my footsteps echoing as we ascended. The steps were made of a light silver metal, the shine enough to give the illusion of a sparkle.

I paused to glance over the railing, taking in the grand entrance once more. From above it looked like a work of art. Every last detail had clearly been thought out. It continued up the staircase as well. Silver framed paintings decorated the walls and led up the stairs. Each picture showing a past king or queen of Morwen.

"Koraine," my father hissed, as I fell behind.

Lifting my skirt, I took the stairs two at a time to catch up. I was breathless reaching the top and tried smoothing out the wrinkles I spotted in my skirt.

"Don't worry, he isn't as scary as they say," a familiar voice said from my side.

General Macilin, one of my father's fellow generals during the war, stood beside me. Out of the group, he was the one person I personally knew. His wife and children had joined us for many dinners in the past and he had a son similar in age to me. Growing up, our parents had joked that one day we would end up married. I never agreed.

Levi Macilin was good looking, but he had almost no personality. It was impossible to hold a conversation with him.

"I'm not worried," I assured, trying not to say otherwise with my face. General Macilin shrugged and carried on with the group.

We finally came upon large wooden doors that our guide paused at. He pushed them open to reveal the grand room hidden within. My jaw dropped, and I quickly shut it as I turned in a circle while entering the room.

A large white marble table sat in the center of the room, almost filling the length of it. At the head of the table, a large chair, made of pure silver, sat overlooking it. To my right, a small reflection pool was built into the ground. The tile flooring, leading to steps into the pool. At a closer glance, I noticed fish swimming in the water. They were larger and elegant with iridescent scales. Swimming through the water, the colors of their scales shifted depending how the light hit them.

"Koi fish," a voice said from behind. Turning, I found myself face to face with a young woman. "I'm assuming they don't have them outside of the palace," she stated with disdain.

The blue gown she wore was elegant, matching her piercing eyes. I immediately tensed, realizing I was speaking to the princess. With a small curtsy, I tried to save myself from appearing a fool.

She let out a small, amused giggle and glanced over me. Deciding I wasn't worth her interest, the princess turned, tossing her dark curls over her shoulder and leaving me to join the others already seated at the table.

My cheeks warmed, and I kept my head down as I shuffled over to the table, quickly taking a seat next to my father. He gave me a concerned look, the way he stared at me felt like he was weighing the risks of me being at the palace. How fast he'd turned from the doting father to the strategic general.

I was out of place, understanding little of the nature of these meetings.

"Don't speak unless spoken too, and try not to look so frightened," my father whispered.

What were we thinking? I couldn't do this. I wasn't prepared to sit at this meeting. Across from me the princess sat, her gaze set on me. I didn't understand what her interest in me was.

Suddenly everyone at the table rose, and I scrambled to my feet, trying to follow their lead. The doors to the room had opened once more, and striding in was the king of Morwen, dressed in his royal blue finery and silver crown. He was taller than I remembered, and his beard had begun to grey.

"You may all be seated," the king said, as he took his place at the head of the table.

Everyone remained silent, awaiting the king's direction. I folded my hands on the table in front of me. My palms were wet with sweat, and I fiddled with one of the rings on my finger. This was the moment I'd been waiting for, my anxiety reaching its peak.

"I will get straight to the point. Abelon is stirring again," the king said. I felt my father stiffen beside me. If the kingdom of fire was stirring, then war was on the horizon. "Many of you fought bravely in the last war against them, preventing them from taking our land, and that is what earned you a seat at this table today. I would be ashamed of myself if I did not take every possible step to prevent that from happening again."

The king paused, surveying everyone at the table.

"I met with the king of Abelon and we came to an agreement of peace."

Collectively, many of the men at the table gasped. Abelon was not known for being a merciful kingdom. It didn't build its power by allowing others who could challenge it to keep their own power. When Abelon struck it left no survivors. It scorched the earth wherever it went and left a trail of death and destruction.

"That's impossible, Abelon doesn't allow peace without a steep price. What do we have that they could want?" an older man seated a few seats away from me asked.

"We have her," the king answered. All eyes fell on me, and I instantly tensed.

"Me?" I questioned nervously.

"Their king has a son who is twenty-three. Prime marriage age. You will marry the prince of Abelon. Their king will leave our kingdom untouched in his endeavors so long as we provide a wife for his son. He wants to ensure that when his son takes the throne, he has heirs."

I couldn't be hearing this correctly. The king wanted me to marry someone, and not just anyone, but the heir to our enemy kingdom. This had to be a cruel joke.

"You can't be serious. I can't marry the prince of Abelon!" I shouted, standing up. My father's strong arm tried to pull me back into my seat, but I ripped free of his grip.

"Are you not twenty-three?" the king asked.

"I am but-"

"Are you already promised to someone else?" he inquired again. "This is one of the highest honors being offered to you and your family, to bring peace to our kingdom."

I slowly sunk back into my seat, realizing the rashness of my outburst. My mind was racing and I still refused to believe I was the key to peace with Abelon.

"No," I said, my voice faltering. I wasn't ready to be married. I'd barely lived my life. How could I tie myself down with such a commitment?

"Ungrateful," the princess murmured under her breath.

"Excuse me?" I snapped, glaring at her. All heads at the table turned, following my stare. The initial shock melted, my skin boiling from the intensity of my building fury.

"The king is offering you a great honor. To keep the peace between our kingdom is no small role. Your family will be rewarded greatly, and you refuse?" the princess scoffed. "As if you have much of a choice," she added under her breath.

"If it's such a great deal why don't you do it?" I shouted, slamming my fists on the table. My father tensed at my outburst.

"I'm already promised to another," the princess shrugged, her face remained bored. "I will be marrying the king of Zetron's nephew."

Of course, the princess would be allowed to marry a man from the kingdom of earth. They were the closest thing we had to an ally. Why would the king risk his own daughter in a cruel and unpredictable kingdom? I was a nobody to him, which meant I was disposable.

"Father?" I asked in a final plea.

"Why her?" my father asked, refusing to look at me.

"The king of Abelon wants retribution for the Battle of Gila. His spies know of your daughter and she is the one he demanded."

He wouldn't even meet my eyes. His gaze remained on the king, awaiting his next command. My chest felt heavy as I sank back into my seat.

"Please," I said, looking at the king. "They'll kill me the moment they decide that peace is no longer what they seek or when their desire for revenge outweighs their need for peace."

The royal family of Abelon was known to be cruel. They'd tortured soldiers in unimaginable ways during the war, and massacred entire villages. I couldn't fathom the punishment they would inflict on the daughter of General Neroe.

"Then you will have made a brave sacrifice for this kingdom," the king answered sternly.

Still, my father wouldn't meet my gaze. I stared at him in silence, hoping he would turn and meet my eyes to tell me that I didn't have to do this. That he wouldn't force me to go. Instead, I just watched as his jaw clenched, and he remained determined to stare blankly ahead at the king.

My heart broke with betrayal as it sank in what this meant. My father had abandoned me when I needed him most. Loyal to the king without question, even if it meant sacrificing his own child. I would pay for his past.

I struggled to hold back the tears stinging the rims of my eyes. My fists were clenched, my nails digging into my skin. I wanted to scream, to argue that this was madness, but I knew it was no good. If I refused, the king would punish me and my entire family.

The thought was enough to make me wish I hadn't eaten the plums earlier in the day. My father may be willing to sacrifice his family, but I

wasn't. I wouldn't allow the king to touch my mother or my brothers. I had to do this. To protect them.

"When do I leave?" I asked, my voice weak. The king held my gaze for a moment before answering.

"Now."

BELLAMY



It was another scorching day, which were only increasing, as the kingdom moved into summer. Most of the citizens didn't mind, they were used to it and continued about their days.

I paused to wipe the beading sweat from my forehead on my sleeve. Outside of the palace, I could feel the effect of heat weighing on me. The large stone walls of the palace insulated the little cool left in the kingdom and I tried to savor it as much as I could.

I finished with my morning duties and training and a guard alerted me that the king wished to see me later in the day. Even as the prince of Abelon, I couldn't deny a request from the king. Not unless I wished to face punishment that day. Most days he didn't even bother with me, bigger concerns filling his time. If he was summoning me, then it must be important. No one denied a request from King Kaius Drakon.

Everything I'd been working toward, fulfilling my duties and proving I was a worthy heir to my father's throne, it had to be for something. A constant nagging voice in my head was always reminding me I would never be good enough, unable to live up to the impossible standards he set, and still I tried.

Carrying a basket of fresh fruits, I made my way down into the city. The streets were lively, with many citizens hurrying about their day and shops opening their doors. A fire nearby burned brightly, and the heat only made me sweat more.

The part of the city nearest the palace was made up of the grandest homes and most exquisite shops. A shop filled with rare and fanciful jewels displayed jewelry on a cart outside. I let out a small laugh under my breath. The rich spent their money on such wasteful items. There were others in the depths of the city who would trade anything just for a warm meal.

My father always said there was nothing more we could do for them. Our kingdom needed protection, armies, and weapons to keep the other kingdoms out and deal with smugglers on the sea. There were no resources to spare to the citizens here.

I'd seen the impact of war, my own mother killed during the last one. I agreed we needed to remain prepared for the constant threat of other kingdoms invading, but I still wished I could do more for those suffering to make ends meet.

Many people I passed kept their heads down. They knew who I was and I wasn't trying to hide it. I wanted my people to know me, but most of them seemed too afraid to approach. The king was known for ruling with an iron fist and I was his heir. It was how he kept this kingdom safe and untouched by other powers.

It wasn't how I wished to rule, but I needed to set my own feelings aside out of necessity. How could I look these people in the eyes if I couldn't promise them basic protection when I became king?

My destination wasn't much farther from where I was. I kept following a winding stone road deeper into the city and the further I made it, the less I saw people out in the street. This section of the city was quiet, hidden away from the bustling of the other sections.

Turning down an alley, I made my way to the unmarked door I'd visited many times before. I paused before knocking on the door and waiting for a familiar face to greet me.

Instead, I found myself face to face with the last person I wished to see. The grumpy old man scowled at me as he opened the door.

"We don't want your charity," he grumbled. It was the same thing every time I came.

"Leave him alone, Alaric," the usually sweet female voice scolded.

Begrudgingly, Alaric let me pass, a scowl plastered to his face. His brows pulled together as he watched me squeeze by with the basket of fruit.

Inside was a cramped room that served as an entryway, kitchen, and dining area. A wooden table with four chairs sat to the side, chips causing the furniture to look well loved.

Tiny pots of flowers grew on the short counter space in the kitchen portion of the room. A wooden cabinet door was cracked open, and I

noticed the little remnants of food stored inside.

"Good morning, Mariam," I said, as I finally saw the woman I had hoped would answer the door. I had no clue how the pair had ended up together, or why she still put up with his crankiness, but Alaric and Mariam were inseparable.

"Prince Bellamy," she said, bowing her head a little with a smile growing. "As always, your kindness knows no bounds."

I heard Alaric scoff from behind me, mumbling under his breath. He hated the royal family. I didn't quite know why, but since the first day I'd met him two years ago, he had treated me the same.

"Don't mind him," Mariam said, softening her smile. "He just didn't sleep well. A new baby came yesterday."

At that, her smile faded. The distant sound of children playing filled my ears, and I prayed to the goddesses that this baby wouldn't stay long enough to be one of them. The orphanage was running out of room and fast. Ever since the war a few years before, many of the children who lost their parents ended up with Mariam and Alaric.

They looked after them and gave them a home. At least until they could find families to place them with.

In this part of the city, there weren't enough resources to spare on them. It was hard enough providing for a family, never mind all of these children. That was why I decided two years ago to bring what I could spare from the palace kitchen each week.

Most of the food would go to waste anyway. There was a surplus of fruits, vegetables, and breads stocked in the kitchen, and a lot of it went bad before it could be used. No one would miss the small baskets I snuck out.

"Bellamy!" I heard my name as a few of the children ran into the room. They tugged at my shirt, each vying for my attention. All of them talking over each other.

"One at a time," I tried to encourage, but it was no use. My presence always riled them up. They seemed to know I had treats for them every visits.

Pulling the item out of my pants pocket, I held it out for them to look at. A few kids let out gasps of wonder at the item, their eyes wide with curiosity as they took in the particularly exciting surprise. Sometimes I was able to find old toys no longer in use around the palace for them. Other times I found old clothing, but this was entirely something new.

"What is it?" the youngest girl in the group asked.

I didn't answer. Instead, stepping away from the group, I placed the metallic item on the table nearby. I got to work, closing the shades to the windows, plunging the room into darkness. Calling a bit of flame to my fingertips, I lit the end of a candle inside the item. As the flames flickered to life, so did images on the walls of the room.

It was a lantern, but no ordinary one. There were cut outs in the metal shaped like stars and the moon. In the dark, the flame illuminated the room and cast shadow figures onto the walls. Many of the kids squealed with joy. I even caught Alaric glancing around the room in amazement.

"I really should be heading back," I whispered to Mariam, afraid to keep my father waiting much longer.

"Thank you," she said, placing a gentle hand on my shoulder.

Sneaking out the door, I left the children still gazing at the walls, entertained by the pictures dancing on them. As I made my way back to the palace, I felt the weight of the heat slowing my pace. With the sun well above me now, the temperature was only increasing.

My gaze was still set on the sun and I didn't see the man in front of me until it was too late. Bumping into him, I knocked the handful of food in his arms to the ground. I tried hurrying to gather them up, ready to apologize.

"Too good to watch where you're walking? Royal scum," the man muttered.

Shocked, I stood frozen. The disdain on the man's face had me speechless. What had I ever done to make him so angry besides this honest accident?

"I'm sorry," I managed. "Let me help." I reached down to grab a cabbage and was shocked when the man slapped my hand away.

I heard gasps from behind and noticed a growing crowd.

"Sorry for what? The never ending taxes! The lack of food!" The man spit on the ground at my feet. "Fuck the royal family."

Flames lit in my palms as my temper rose.

Was I going to allow this? He'd just dishonored my family and questioned my motives. If I let this go, these people would never respect me. Everything my father did, he did for their own good. If this man was too blind to see that, then that wasn't my fault.

Before I could make a decision about what to do, the sound of horses trotting down the street called my attention. I extinguished my flames, as a

group of royal guards circled the man. It was risky having them find me. Any one of them could tell the king where I'd been. I had to hope they wouldn't.

"Your highness," one said. "Do not concern yourself with him, we will handle this," he assured.

I could've handled the situation myself, but I couldn't now. If I sent these guards off, I looked like a weak leader. The guards would never listen to my command if I took pity on every person who disrespected the royal family. A small pit of guilt formed knowing he'd be beaten or lashed for this.

Deep down, I knew it wasn't a fair punishment. It was harsh, but that was what was necessary to ensure peace and prosperity in Abelon. My father had taught me that lesson from a young age. The moment one allowed disorder was the moment they would lose their kingdom to another.

I pictured my people as slaves to another kingdom, forced to perish and suffer under their control. I would never allow that.

With a slow nod, I turned back to the road leading to the palace. I slowly began to walk away, unable to bring myself to look back and see what the guards would do with the man.

The ordeal left me reeling. Something about the man's words didn't sit right with me. I knew that these parts of the city struggled with food, but everyone in this kingdom struggled. We needed to focus on ensuring our status of power so that someday everyone would be able to prosper. It was what my father worked toward now, and what I aimed to accomplish when I became king.

But before that day would ever come, I needed to hurry back to see my father.

THE DOORS to the throne room were cracked open, as if I was expected. Entering the throne room, I sunk into a low kneeling bow before my father. He was seated in the red and black velvet cushioned throne on a dais. Behind him, large flames towered in pillars.

"Rise," he commanded. I obeyed, standing and waiting for him to speak. "I hear your morning training sessions are going well. General Falco reports that you are one of the best warriors with fire he has seen in a long time, destined to lead our people to greatness."

I'd been working tirelessly on my training. A good leader was one who could not only help a kingdom prosper but also lead them in times of battle. I would be prepared for anything thrown at me. I needed to be more skilled than the best warriors out there.

"He does me great honor saying so," I answered. I always maintained formality with my father. We may be blood, but he was still the king, and he wouldn't hesitate to remind me of that.

"I called you here because I think it's time you take on more responsibility as prince," he said, leaning back into the throne.

This was everything I had been working for. My father would finally allow me to take on actual important roles, like sitting in on his counsel meetings or potentially leading training drills with the guards. He was finally seeing the worthy son I was.

He was waiting for my answer, reading my face. I tried to train it back to neutral. Not letting my excitement show too much. This is what I should expect. I couldn't act like the child my father always viewed me as. I needed to be the man he was waiting for me to become.

"I will happily take on more responsibility. There is nothing more important to me than serving this kingdom as its prince," I answered, hoping it was close to the answer he was searching for.

"Good," he said, stroking his long black beard, deep in thought. "That settles it then. You're to be married in the next few months."

I tried not to let the shock show on my face. This was not what I'd been expecting at all. I'd always known I would need to get married and produce heirs, but with how busy my father kept me I hadn't had time to even think about women or marriage.

If this was what was best for Abelon, then I would do it.

"I'd be honored to begin searching for our future queen," I answered.

"No need," he answered.

I was at a loss for words. Did my father already have someone in mind? Why was this only the first time I was hearing about this if he knew who he'd like me to marry?

"You will marry General Neroes' daughter. We're entering an agreement for temporary peace with Morwen, and this is part of the deal. They will help us clear the seas of smugglers and remain an ally to us." I couldn't be hearing this correctly. Morwen? General Neroe? Our biggest enemies? Why would we agree to peace with them? My rage showed as my clenched fists burst into flames. I held back every argument I wanted to shout at my father, trying to extinguish my flames.

"How could you do this? Why would you let such vile people into our home, especially General Neroes' daughter? He slaughtered so many of our men during the war!"

The words fell out of my mouth before I could stop them. To question the king was a great offense, but to let a Morwenian into our home was an even greater offense to our own people.

"What about Mother?" I questioned. Had he so easily forgotten the way Morwen killed my mother, his wife?

"Your mother would want you to do what's best for this kingdom!"

His words hit me like a slap in the face. My mother led as a kind and gentle queen. She cared deeply for every last person in the kingdom. How could anyone ever take her life so easily? How could I allow myself to marry one of those people? I would never learn to care for them. I would resent them for the rest of my life.

"Do I need to make this another lesson learned?" my father asked, rising from his throne.

I cowered away, ashamed of my insubordination. The tiger stripe burn scars wrapping up the upper portion of each of my arms were a reminder of how cruel my father's lessons could be. There was no use arguing against this. I could resist all I wanted, but his word was law.

"No, your majesty," I bowed my head, trying to hide my frustration.

"That's what I thought. I have my reasons for the agreement and choosing his daughter," he said, striding down the dais stairs. As he left the throne, the seat immediately lit with flames. The fire trailed close behind him, creating a path. "Your future wife arrives tomorrow. I expect you to carry out your duties, and do not embarrass me. You will retrieve her from the docks when she arrives, and you will make it your duty to win over her favor. I will announce when the wedding will take place once I feel this woman is serving her purpose here."

Was he mad? He planned to let this Morwenian into our kingdom and welcome her under our roof. It was unheard of. I wanted to ask just how long it would be until then, but I held my tongue.

I couldn't imagine sharing intimate moments with any Morwenian. The idea made my skin prickle. Deep down resentment was boiling toward my father for forcing me into this. Never did I expect my duties would push me this far.

I nodded, realizing my father expected me to agree to these demands he'd set before me.

"Good. You're dismissed," he said, turning back to the throne, the flames behind him dying.

Hurrying from the throne room, I stormed through the palace. There was only one person I wanted to see and I made my way to the palace oasis where I knew I'd find my younger sister.

I sensed the beast before I saw it. Somehow I always knew when she was coming.

Above a large shadow passed over me. Glancing up I spotted the beast flying toward the palace, its black scales shining in the sunlight.

My dragon, Imry.

I'd seek her out later for a ride. It was the one way I knew how to clear my head and think straight again. Our bond ran deep, and Imry could always sense exactly what I needed. She only responded to my command.

The palace oasis was tucked away in a rose garden, far from the peering eyes of palace workers. There was a small pool of water, built for cooling down on these insufferably hot days.

"Nyla," I called out to my sister as she resurfaced from under the water. "You know sometimes I question if you are the princess of the right kingdom."

My sister was constantly swimming in the dreaded thing. I never swam. I couldn't stand the water. It seemed like fire's one weakness and a constant reminder of our enemy, the Morwenians. Why would I purposely douse myself in it if I didn't need to? I avoided swimming and the sea at all costs. Having this pool on palace grounds was like having a piece of our enemy within our walls.

"Don't be such a baby, and get in here," Nyla said, splashing a bit of water at my feet.

I folded my arms across my chest, my scowl deepening, I was in no mood to fool around.

"I know that look," Nyla said, her face growing a little more concerned. "You've come from Father haven't you?"

My silence was the only answer she needed. I walked over to a small tree beside the pool and sunk to the ground, savoring the shade. Watching as my sister pushed herself up out of the pool, I waited for her to join me. Drops of water dripped from her fiery red hair as she walked over.

"What'd he want this time?" she asked gently, sliding down next to me.

"I'm to be married in the next few months," I said.

My sister let out a small gasp and hugged me. I pulled away fast, unwilling to soak myself. I didn't share her excitement.

"That's it?" she asked. "That's why you are so angry? I think this is fantastic news. You'll have a wife. A future queen. Isn't this what you wanted?"

"It's not marriage that's the problem," I huffed.

She cocked her head in confusion. Trying to read me, she narrowed her eyes.

"Father has arranged my marriage to a Morwenian."

My sister's face paled, the look of horror replacing her prior excitement.

"No," she whispered, still in shock. I only nodded. "When does she arrive?" she asked, placing a comforting hand on my shoulder.

I sighed, knowing that the answer was not what she was going to want to hear. Having a Morwenian here would change both of our lives. They'd taken everything from us. How could we ever forgive that?

"Tomorrow."

KORAINE



hen I had dreamed of leaving this kingdom to see the world, this was not what I had in mind. I'd been ushered out of the meeting by warriors and rushed straight to the docks without any formal goodbyes. The possibility of me running away if allowed home one last time was too much of a threat to the king's plans.

A ship had already been awaiting us.

To my relief I found my sea serpent beside the ship soon after it left. He always knew how to find me. There was little my people knew about sea serpent's senses, but the little we did know was that they were much more sensitive than our own. Talay was now traveling next to our large ship in the water, our bond allowing us to sense each other.

"Do you sense it too?" I whispered, wondering if Talay felt the same dread I did approaching Abelon. At times I wished I could actually read his mind, but being bonded with him was as close as I'd get.

If I was leaving the safety of our kingdom indefinitely, then there was no way I would leave him behind. It was the only comfort of home I had left. My father had betrayed my trust, offering me up as some commodity to be sold. He hadn't even had the guts to face me after agreeing to the king's demands.

The serpents head poked from the water. His light blue scales had not grown as deep of a color as other sea serpents, but I always thought that just made him unique. He dove back beneath the waves.

My stomach turned like I was going to be seasick, but it had nothing to do with the rocking of the ship I was on. Looking over the railing, I watched the waves trying to spot Talay below. The water out this far was too dark to see anything beneath. I sighed, giving up and deciding it was best if I spent the rest of the journey below deck.

I'd been given a small room on the ship, since the journey would be a full day of travel. We'd left late in the day, and wouldn't arrive until morning to Abelon. The four walls of the room felt like they were closing in on me. The room smelt like mildew and when I sat on the bed; I swore I saw dust fly up.

Lavish conditions for the future queen of a kingdom. A quiet laugh escaped my lips, the absurdity of the situation sinking in.

A chest sat in the corner of the room, a water drop crest branded into it. A few crew members had carried it down when we'd boarded the ship. It was packed with the finest clothing and jewelry Morwen had to offer. I'd been told the princess herself had handpicked every item within for me, as if I would have the same taste as her. It was the only piece of my own kingdom I was allowed to take with me and that was the only thing keeping me from tossing it overboard.

Every time I tried to forget everything that occurred, princess Asena's sniveling face came right back into my mind. Judging me for not wanting to be shipped off for some arranged marriage and standing arms crossed watching the warriors lead me off to the ship. And to the prince of our enemy kingdom!

Falling back into the bed, I let out a long, frustrated growl.

Part of me wanted to throw myself over the edge of the ship. Let Talay whisk me away to one of the random, outlier islands across the Vitrum Sea, but what good would that do? Then I'd be stuck with no money, no family, and the possibility of the king hunting me to face punishment for my crime.

Instead, I was stuck on this damned ship. Doomed to face whatever the dawn may bring.

I let my thoughts wander, as I prepared to get some sleep. Pulling off each piece of clothing I was wearing, I tried to picture what the prince might look like. It wasn't like there were pictures of him lying around in Morwen, and I'd never left the kingdom until now.

My mind painted the worst possible picture of my future husband. From all the stories and rumors I heard, the royal family was vicious and cruel. The man I imagined embodied this in every way, with rigid features, and a permanent scowl. His personality would be no better either.

I should've considered my parents' hopes for me to marry Levi more seriously. At least with him I wouldn't be worried if I'd live to see my wedding day.

Pulling off my sandals, a lurch from the ship knocked me over. Standing up, I used the bed post to gain my balance again. Another lurch had my heart racing. Was this supposed to happen? I'd been on small fishing boats before, but never a large ship like this. Again, the boat swayed in an unnatural manner.

Without thinking, I decided to go above deck to see what was causing it.

I found the stairs not far from my room and climbed them. As the cold breeze drifting across the water hit me, it nipped at my skin left uncovered by my thin nightgown. A shiver raced down my spine and the bottom of the gown blew with the breeze. I crossed my arms, realizing how exposed I was.

One of the passing crew members paused, spotting me at the top of the stairs. His brows raised, baffled to find me above deck.

"What are you doing out here? It isn't safe," he stammered.

"What do you mean not safe?" I asked, rubbing my upper arms to keep warm.

"There's a storm coming. You need to stay in your room for the night. Captain's orders. All unnecessary crew is to remain safe below deck until we dock tomorrow."

Many of us on the ship may be able to control water, but we weren't immune to the threat of lightning or this ship capsizing.

I tried to glance out at the sea, straining my neck to look past the man in front of me. I hoped that Talay was fairing alright in these conditions.

A large, violent wave crashed against the ship, forcing me to grab onto the hand rail leading down the steps. Turning, I conceded to the order. I had no desire to be caught up in this storm above deck. My room would do just fine for the night.

"Quick, over here!" a crew member called out, a commotion forming on one side of the ship. "He went overboard! Help him, he has no ability to control the water!"

My stomach sunk hearing the plea for help. The waves continually crashed into the ship and it was hard to see anything under only the moonlight.

Without thinking, I ran to the edge of the ship. I wanted to help, I couldn't leave someone out there.

I hesitated for a moment, before climbing the side of the ship.

"Stop! What are you doing? You have no idea where he is!" someone shouted at me.

Ignoring the warning, I jumped over. I prayed to Odaesia that I'd be right and find my sea serpent waiting below.

My body hit the cold sea, and I used my abilities to control the water around me to keep from sinking. The sea pushed back at me, sending continual waves in my direction. I could barely keep up with pushing them around me.

A moment later, my body was rising from the water. The large sea serpent let me cling to his back.

"Find him," I ordered. Talay dove under the waves, taking me with him.

I manipulated the water to form a bubble around myself. A safe pocket for me to breathe while we searched. Even with my bubble, my abilities did not protect me from the cold of the sea. Without the sun, the nip of the cold was even more brutal.

Talay swam fast, descending further from the surface. I squinted hoping to spot someone. In the distance, a blurry form came into view. My sea serpent aimed directly for it.

The closer we got I was confident it was the crew member, unconscious. I grabbed him once in reach, and held tight as Talay brought us to the surface. The moment we broke through it, I manipulated the water to carry us up in a vortex to the deck of the ship. I dropped the man, trying to catch my breath.

The man coughed up water, barely regaining consciousness. Other crew members carried him away to warm him up before the cold caused sickness.

"Are you crazy? What were you thinking? The king could have our heads for this!" one of the crew members from before exclaimed. "Go back beneath deck and warm up. I can't have you falling ill before we deliver you to Abelon," he sighed.

Heading back down the stairs, I carefully made my way back to my small room. Many of the non-essential crew members were trying to get some sleep in hammocks hung wherever they fit. Clinging to the wall to keep my balance, I found the wooden door that marked my room.

The small bed had a single thin blanket and a flat pillow for comfort. It wasn't anything fancy, but it would do. This could be the last form of comfort I would be afforded.

I wrung the water from my hair, watching as it dripped on the wooden floor. I changed into a spare nightgown I found in the chest and wrapped the blanket around myself to warm up.

My only focus was finding a way out of this arrangement as fast as I could. I wanted to go back to Morwen, to see my family again. To be able to laugh about this all with Caspian someday. I considered how he might have reacted, my father returning home without me. That traitor! He was no longer family to me. He may be my blood, but I had no more loyalties to him. Not after he'd abandoned me so quickly. I didn't think I could ever forgive him.

A small tear escaped as I climbed into the bed, further curling up under the blanket around me. I let the tears keep flowing, because the moment my feet hit the ground in Abelon I would no longer be able to show this weakness. My heart was hardening, a solid layer forming around it to protect me from ever feeling this pain again.

The king wanted me to play a part, to protect our kingdom.

I would play the part and keep my people safe, but it wouldn't be because I was the future queen of Abelon. I would become a warrior. I'd fight for my survival and do whatever it took to make it out of this all alive.

With my mind still swirling with thoughts of what was to come, I closed my eyes. Listening to the sound of the waves crashing against the boat, I let myself drift off to sleep.

THE BOAT DOCKED and I was finally allowed to leave the ship. The storm had cleared up in the early hours of dawn. Multiple times I'd tried begging the crew to let me just ride Talay this morning, but they were on strict orders from the king to not lose sight of me before I was in Abelon's hands. After recklessly throwing myself overboard, they were taking no more chances.

"Thank you," a man said, before I could step foot off the ship. "You saved me last night," he said when I tilted my head at him.

"It was nothing," I said, a smile growing across my lips.

"I am forever in your debt," he added, but I shook my head.

"Just make it home safe," I said and he nodded.

Walking down the ramp attached to the ship, I took in the new kingdom that would become my home for the rest of my life. If I could even call this prison a home. Would I ever be allowed to leave and visit my family? Would they be able to visit me here? Or would the prince keep me locked away in some corner of the palace where I would be forgotten?

Stepping off the ship, into the capital city of Raden, I was met by a line of Abelonian guards. Each stood tall, waiting for something.

As their eyes turned, I followed their line of sight. A tall, handsome young man strode toward the dock. He wasn't dressed in the same uniform as the other guards.

He appeared young to be in a position of such power. As much as I wanted to look away and let my resentment for this kingdom build, I found I couldn't take my eyes off of him. His short, dark hair was slightly messy, and his shirt sleeves were pushed back, exposing his tan skin. I found it odd that he would wear long sleeves in this heat. His muscular frame towered over many of the guards as he passed them. Our gazes locked as he got closer and I was sure I could see hues of red and gold mixed into his dark brown eyes.

As he finally stood before the guards, they all bowed their heads.

My mistake was instantly apparent. He wasn't wearing a crown or the fancy finery I expected, but I knew deep down who this was.

The prince had come to claim his wife himself.

My cheeks warmed from the way I had eyed him only moments before. This was not the man I expected. He seemed to too normal. Too human. How was he a member of the same cruel family that tortured my people? A monster hidden behind a distracting mask.

I shuddered at the thought of spending my life with him.

"Prince Bellamy," I said, acknowledging my future husband.

"Keep up," the prince said, turning without another word.

At first, I didn't realize he meant me and had to jog to catch up. I glanced back at the ship where the Morwenians prepared to depart again. I spotted a few guards carrying the chest the princess had sent with me.

Ugh.

I'd really been hoping that thing would stay on the ship, but a small part of me was thankful for the reminder of home. If they believed a small chest of fancy gifts would make me forgive them for sending me here, they were wrong.

The prince was giving me the complete silent treatment, his shoulders tense as he strode through the streets. I noticed many of the Abelonians out were avoiding his path. Even the people here knew of the prince's reputation. The thought brought a grin to my face.

"Why do you look so smug?" The prince was now glaring at me. My smile vanished, turning into a scowl.

I ignored the question. I would avoid sharing as much as I could with the prince until I knew more.

"So what, are we heading to a temple to get married now?" I asked, crossing my arms.

Back in Morwen there were usually all day celebrations when a couple was married, but I doubted I'd be given that privilege here.

The prince looked me over like I'd said something shocking. His dark eyes staring me down.

"We won't be officially married for a few weeks or months even," he said, waiting for me to react.

A few months? What kind of sick joke was this?

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"The king will decide when the wedding is to be held."

He went on to detail what the wedding would look like when it did occur, but I tuned him out. I was too distracted by the city we were walking through. It was set up similarly to Alua, but without any of the water ways. We passed an apothecary and a pain stung my heart. The stone front reminded me of my mother's shop.

By the time he finished explaining the ridiculous nature of the wedding I would be forced to participate in, we reached the outside of the palace gates.

It was everything Morwen's palace wasn't. The outside was mainly built with black materials, and a few details of gold. In front of us stood no normal gate. The gate was made up of a wall of flames. I could easily douse them with my water, but something told me the prince wouldn't react well to that.

Instead, I watched as he manipulated the flames to part for us. Walking through, I could feel the heat of them threatening to singe my skin if I lingered. Every part of me was on edge as the flames closed behind us.

Trapped.

I felt like an animal penned in. I had no where to run even if I found a way to escape before they killed me for trying. They could decide to kill me before then for no reason. Was I really worth keeping alive? I only hoped that today the answer was yes. If they changed their minds now, I wasn't prepared to fight my way out.

A loud, deep growl drew my attention to the sky. I wasn't expecting to find the large beast that was perched on one of the towers of the palace. Its dark scales were a stark contrast to its beady red eyes. It watched me with the precision of a predator.

"That's Imry," the prince said without even glancing up to the dragon. "Don't worry, it isn't likely she will eat you. But I can't promise she won't turn you to ash if you piss her off." I didn't miss the smug look on his face as he finished the thought.

Heading in to the palace I tried to ignore the dragon, afraid of offending her. I had grown up around sea serpents, but dragons were a whole different beast. They were temperamental and unpredictable. I didn't want to wait around to find out if Bellamy's warning was true.

The prince escorted me through the palace. I had no idea where he was leading me, but I tried to map out every turn we took, memorizing the layout. The information could be useful later. Inside, the hallways and rooms were decorated in fiery red. There were bits of black and gold mixed in. Everywhere I looked elements of fire were displayed. One of the halls had a thin glass wall raised a few feet off the ground, a fire trailing along behind it. The quick glances I stole into the rooms we passed I spotted candles lit with flames, gold treasures on display, and paintings hung on the walls.

Finally, we entered the throne room, the walls lined with black columns and a golden chandelier hung in the center of the room. Before me sat the king of Abelon, looking down at me from his dais. I shuddered, his presence was enough to make me shift uncomfortably. After years of hearing stories about him, I knew that those stories didn't portray him accurately. He was even worse than they made him out to be. It was all of my nightmares coming true, his dark gaze settled on me.

The king stood from his throne, making his way slowly before us. A golden crown sat atop his head, the red rubies set into it glistening as they caught the light of the fires in the room. Pausing at the bottom of the steps, the king held his arms out wide, a menacing grin spreading across his lips.

"Welcome to Abelon."

My knees felt weak in his presence. I knew one step out of line and he could easily kill me. He strode closer to me until he was mere inches away. Leaning in close he lowered his voice so that only I could hear.

"You will play your part here, or you will not live to see your kingdom again. You will marry my son and produce heirs. I have not forgotten the lives your father took," he barely whispered the threat. I shuddered as the words sunk in. "Do you understand?"

I nodded, afraid to speak.

"Good," he said, backing away. "I hope you find your new home to your liking."

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KORAINE



he meeting with the king was no friendly welcome, instead a warning was laced in his words. Step out of line in my kingdom, and I have the power to destroy you. I understood the message, and I was no fool to think the king would greet me with open arms. I was just a solution to their problems with Morwen and a means to exact revenge for the Battle of Gila. How long would this negotiation last? In this world, war was always inevitable. Did I have one year or ten before this peace crumbled and I was disposed of?

The prince led me through new halls of the palace after his father's show of power. Bellamy had said little more than a few words to me since I'd arrived. I supposed silence would be my new companion in this large dwelling. There was still one question that burned in the back of my mind, and as much as I hated to break our mutual silence, I needed to know.

"Will I be allowed to roam freely?" I asked.

"You're the future queen. You have the freedom to go anywhere in this palace and city with little exceptions. But do not be naïve, I know all that goes on here and if you take one misstep, there will be consequences. This is your home now, you'll do good to remember that," Bellamy sneered the last bit.

I would be able to learn everything I needed to know about this place without having to sneak around to do so. If there was any way out of this marriage arrangement that did not bring my people death and destruction. I would find it.

Turning down a hall, I noticed there were more guards placed in this wing of the palace than others.

"Where are we?" I asked, my palms sweating.

"My chambers," he answered, pausing at a door before pushing it open.

Why had he brought me to his chambers? Was I expected to share his room?

"This is where you will stay," he said.

My eyes widened. I had expected a small room or cell of my own. The prospect of sharing a bed with my enemy made my stomach sink. The room was different from everything else I'd seen so far. It was much brighter, a large balcony bringing in most of the light in the room. The walls were a pale grey rather than the black that spanned every other room. A black stone fireplace was built into the far end of the room, with trinkets lining the mantle. I spotted a small golden dragon perched on it, it's wings reflecting the sunlight shining into the room.

"As my betrothed, you are expected to stay in the same chambers as me." As my brows furrowed and nostrils flared he said, "Don't worry you're not staying in this portion of the chambers."

I followed him down a short hall that broke off from his own room, at the end was a wooden door. Opening it, he motioned for me to enter and as I did, my heartbeat finally settled. Inside was a bed made only big enough for one person, its wooden frame simple. The room was cramped with minimal decor besides a few shelves. A wardrobe tucked into a corner was cracked open and empty.

A few guards were carrying in blankets for the bed from another door across from me. Carrying in my chest, another two guards entered the room. I immediately noticed that one of them wore a patch depicting flames that I had not seen on the other guards.

Again, my gaze was drawn toward the second door as some of the guards exited.

"This was my private study before. I had it converted into a small room for you. We will still have to share a washroom," Bellamy explained his face remaining stern. "That door is another entrance to this room. There will be guards posted nearby at all times in case you need them, but they have orders to let you roam as you please."

My own entrance to and from the chambers would make my life easier. I could avoid the prince even more now.

Bellamy turned to leave the room without anymore explanation.

"That's it?" I asked. I was delighted to be rid of the prince, but there was still so much I didn't know. Was I allowed to eat? If I went outside, did I have to worry about a fire-breathing dragon eating me?

"I'll be back later for you," he said, scowling. The way he drew out the last bit made my skin crawl. "I have other duties to attend to first."

Were there duties a future queen was expected to complete? I wasn't prepared for this role. My childhood hadn't been spent with tutors teaching me my royal duties or other young ladies in training. I hadn't a clue what I was doing or how I was expected to act, but Bellamy made it clear his kingdom had expectations for us.

"I want to see the rest of the palace," I blurted, unable to stop my curiosity.

His back was to me, and he remained still. He took another step toward the door. My hope faded of any chance that he'd continue showing me around. Freedom while alone would be useful, but not until I gained my bearings here.

"I will show her around, my prince," the guard wearing the flame patch offered. The prince scoffed, still making his way out the door.

"I'm sure you have more important things to do," he said over his shoulder as he left the room, letting the door slam behind him.

"What's his problem?" I asked.

The man gave a small chuckle. It was the closest thing to normalcy I'd experienced since I arrived.

"Old grudges." The man shrugged. "I'm Cyrus," he said, with a grin.

Everything in me told me to be weary. This man still worked for the king, but he was being kind. If I was to be stuck here, it wouldn't hurt to have a friend of sorts and he was offering me a way out of this room for the day.

"I'm Koraine."

"I know. We all know about you. Don't get too discouraged by the others, they just fear what they don't understand. A Morwenian in Abelon is unheard of, especially one the prince if not fond of."

"Is it that obvious he despises me?" I giggled, following Cyrus from the room and eager to see the rest of my new home.

THE WHIRLWIND of arrival earlier in the day distracted me from the heat of Abelon. I was struggling as the blazing sun beat down on my skin. I missed the cool, blissful water of Morwen. On a day this hot, I would've spent it out in the sea with Talay, swimming and riding along the waves.

A tight squeeze in my chest halted me.

"Are you alright?" Cyrus asked, as I wiped sweat from my forehead.

"Summers in Morwen are nowhere near this hot," I said. "How do you deal with this every day?"

Cyrus let out a soft laugh. "You get used to it."

We were strolling through a garden on the palace grounds. Already I'd seen at least three dining rooms, a ballroom, and a hallway filled with old paintings of all the past kings and queens of Abelon. This portion of the palace was quite different from everything else. It was serene, and severely lacking all the flames that were found everywhere else.

Flowers of every color spread across the landscape. I reached up to pluck an apple as we passed under a bunch of fruit trees. Letting my teeth sink in to the juicy fruit, I let out a small moan. It was the perfect mix of sweet and tangy. The crisp red skin giving way to the soft and delicious inside.

"Don't let the prince catch you eating those," Cyrus joked from behind me.

I almost choked, spinning around wide-eyed. The panic on my face had Cyrus laughing. The laugh deepened as I quickly tried to wipe my hands of the juice that had dripped onto my fingers.

"I'm only kidding. Those are just his favorites," Cyrus explained. "But there are plenty. I doubt he'd even notice someone else was also eating them."

Letting out a sigh of relief, I gave Cyrus's arm a playful shove the way I would one of my brothers. Realizing my mistake, I immediately took a step back. "I'm so sorry," I began, already I had let myself become too comfortable with him.

"Don't be, I'm glad you feel like you've got a friend here. I'm sure this is already hard enough for you," he said, understanding flashing across his face.

I let myself sink deeper into my thoughts, skepticism holding me back from accepting the offer of friendship. One didn't become captain of the guard if they were so easily swayed away from the royal family. This man would never truly be someone I could trust in Abelon.

Shaking my head, I agreed, "More than you know."

We continued our journey through the garden. Portions of it reminded me of the bunches of flowers that grew atop the cliffs of Morwen. Although, the flowers here looked slightly different and I didn't recognize half of the varieties found in the garden.

A vibrant orange flower caught my eye, its petals including a blend of light red color. They were tall, with sturdy stems, the flower itself the size of my palm.

I took in the aroma of flowers, allowing myself to close my eyes for a moment and enjoy the scent. Continuing through the garden, my eyes widened the further we went. Each turn hid a new collection of plants.

As we approached the far end of the garden, a slight glisten caught my eye. There was a pool of water ahead, and in the heat the promise of cool relief looked inviting. Hurrying over, I manipulated an orb of water from the pool, bringing it up to my face. I let the orb burst, splashing water onto my skin.

"I already forgot you were able to do that," Cyrus said, rubbing the light brown stubble that covered his chin. His hair was a similar color, slicked back out of his face to help with the intense heat. "It isn't often someone with water abilities comes to Abelon. At least not on peaceful terms."

A nervous laugh escaped from my lips. I wasn't sure I would call my arrangement peaceful terms.

Lifting my skirt, I walked down the first stone step of the pool. The cold water brushed against my ankles, a sense of relief and comfort washing over me. This was my home. This is where I belonged, in the water, where no one could bother me.

"You can swim if you want," Cyrus offered. "You have no where to be and it is extremely hot out today. One of the hottest days of the summer I believe."

"Are you sure?" I asked, my eyebrows drawing together.

"Why not?" he shrugged.

I plunged into the water, letting it soak over me. My clothing clung tight to my body, but I didn't care. Using my ability, I sent a orb of water slowly toward Cyrus. It wasn't fair that I was the only one enjoying the benefits of

cooling down. I let it burst only inches from his face, so it splashed over his skin. Wiping his eyes, he gave me a smile.

"Why don't you come in?" I asked.

"Oh, I couldn't," he said, waving his hands.

Shaping more water, I crafted a crown on top of my head. "I am your future queen. That has to count for something, right?" I laughed.

"Well..." He seemed to think it over. Glancing around the garden, he pulled off his shirt that had the captain of the guard patch on it. Seemingly satisfied that no one was around, he took a running leap into the pool. I suspended the drops of water that flew into the air as he sunk beneath the surface. Emerging, he looked around amazed, until all the droplets turned their path to him. I manipulated them all to come crashing down on his head.

A mischievous grin spread across his lips. Flames leapt to life in the palm of his hand, which he held right above the water's surface. Lowering it close to the surface, he let the two bump against each other. As the elements collided, steam filled the air. He created more flames in his other hand, increasing the amount of steam created. I let out a laugh.

"Um, captain..." a young man coughed, standing beside the pool, neither of us paying enough attention to hear him approach.

Cyrus hurriedly exited the pool, water dripping from his body. His mischievous grin had long disappeared. The pair whispered, out of reach of me overhearing their conversation. Soon the young man hurried off, not looking back.

"Unfortunately, I have a matter to attend to," Cyrus said with a frown. "Will you be able to find your way back to your chambers?"

I nodded my head, a bit disappointed he already had to leave, the day shaping into a pleasant surprise.

THE REST of my time spent in the pool I allowed myself to float on the surface, staring up at the blue sky. Each second that passed was another I survived my first day in Abelon. Every now and then, I manipulated the water to drift me around the pool.

Growing bored, I ventured back to my room. I made multiple wrong turns and walked in circles for almost an hour before I found my door again.

I explored the confines of the room and found that there were little items left behind from what had once served as an office. A few random books remained on a shelf, and a vase with flowers was perched next to them. I recognized the yellow and red flowers filling it from the gardens. The room was better than a cold, hard cell.

Deciding I needed a new distraction, I picked up one of the books off the shelf. It was a beautifully bound copy of a book filled with short stories. They were tales of goddesses and heroes. Some I recognized as ones I'd heard when I was little, and others I had never heard of. Skimming through the pages, I decided on a story following a young hero who saved his village from a dragon.

I'd lost track of time flipping through story after story. It had grown dark outside, and the light of the moon poured through the one window in my room.

Halfway through the tale of how Aeris blessed Zetron with endless fields of green, a knock came to my door. Before I could answer the prince let himself in. I jumped out of my bed. This was the first I'd been alone with him all day. The way he was eyeing me like he might strike had me taking a few steps back. I didn't have any weapons, but I always had water. And one thing I was sure he was painfully aware of was that water was fire's one weakness.

With a grin, I let my shoulders relax a little. "If you're here to kill me, I have to warn I won't just helplessly surrender to you."

"If I wanted you dead, you wouldn't have made it two steps into this kingdom," the prince scoffed. "Put this on, we have a dinner to attend." He tossed a gown at me, I barely had time to catch it.

Leaving me to change, I could hear Bellamy positioning himself outside my door. I rolled my eyes, realizing I was stuck with him as my escort for the night.

Holding up the red gown I was given, I frowned as I looked it over. The dress was simple, with minimal detailing to it. The neckline would sit above my collarbone as most traditional gowns did. They were trying to turn me into the perfect Abelonian bride already.

I wouldn't stand for it. My duty to my people was above all to keep them safe from war, but it didn't mean I had to become one of these people. I would always be Morwenian at heart.

There was no clothing in the wardrobe the prince had moved into the room. Looking down at my clothing, the wrinkled material was dirty from swimming in it. I couldn't wear this to dinner, even if I did want to annoy the prince.

At the foot of my bed sat the chest they allowed me to keep from Morwen. Opening it up, I saw the gowns the princess had packed inside.

I let out a small giggle, realizing the princess had done me one favor. Inside the chest was a light blue gown made of minimal fabric. It was mainly strands of ribboned fabric, intended to wrap around my torso to just cover my breasts. My stomach was left mostly exposed except for one ribbon that wrapped around me. The bottom of the dress turned into a long skirt, the material light and somewhat sheer. If the light caught me the right way, the silhouette of my body would be visible to those watching.

I tugged at the material suddenly realizing how exposed I felt. I couldn't let my confidence falter in front of the prince. The wall of ice around my heart hardened further, reminding me of the warrior I needed to be. I'd play their games and keep Morwen safe, but I wouldn't lose myself in the process. These were my enemies, and I was still a Morwenian. The dress was a reminder of that.

It was the perfect weapon for the night.

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BELLAMY



here will be a welcome dinner tonight for our guest," the king had said to me that morning. I didn't miss the way he'd said guest with such disgust. "Consider it the first step towards convincing me you can handle this responsibility. Keep Koraine in line, or I will be forced to kill her before we can even use her."

I didn't question what he'd meant.

The king may have signed a peace agreement with Morwen, but I knew better. Peace throughout the kingdoms never lasted long. Someone always wanted more. I'd witnessed my father's welcoming of Koraine, a clear threat hidden behind his words. Her safety here was not guaranteed.

I was now waiting outside my future wife's door, and already I could feel the hatred she harbored toward me. It didn't matter. I disliked this arrangement as much as she did. Why would I want to marry my enemy? My people would despise me for years to come over it and I would resent myself for it.

Already I was trying to plot ways to rid myself of her. If she disappeared or was lost in an accident, could Morwen really blame us? Would they retaliate for the daughter of one general? Was it worth finding out? I would never intentionally put my people in harm's way, everything I had worked toward was to keep them safe. I'd have to be more clever than that.

Koraine was taking too long. There was no way putting on the dress I'd left with her should have taken this amount of time. Already she was testing me, seeing what she could get away with before I snapped.

Turning to knock on the door, it flew open just before my fist could reach it. My jaw almost fell open. The outfit she was wearing was not the same dress I'd given to her only minutes ago. There wasn't a single bit of her body left to the imagination.

Glancing away quickly, I tried to hide my shock.

"That's not what I gave you," I grumbled, annoyed at her blatant attempt to frustrate me. I became even more annoyed, realizing it was working too.

"I know," she said, smiling sweetly at me.

I couldn't tear my eyes from that damned dress as she strode in front of me. Her confidence only made it look that much better on her. This woman may be my enemy, but I wasn't blind, she was beautiful. The light blue material was a perfect compliment to her tan skin.

Koraine didn't know where she was going, but she still stalked off like she didn't just make me wait forever. I easily caught up, taking control of the situation again. My father wasn't going to be pleased when he saw her enter the feast, and I would be blamed. The red dress was one Nyla had picked that was on par with the more traditional gowns of Abelonian women. Nyla had a talent when it came to clothing, always knowing exactly the perfect piece for someone. She always insisted on handling these things herself instead of using palace workers. Neither of us agreed with treating the workers as our slaves.

There would be nobles and influential families attending this feast, and this was the first time they'd be seeing Koraine. If we appeared to have zero control over her actions, it would be an embarrassment. The king's every move was always being questioned.

"This dinner is a feast to welcome you, but also one to convince these people to accept you as their queen someday and accept these peace negotiations. I advise you keep quiet and stay by my side tonight," I warned, hoping I could rein in her clear stubbornness.

"And if I don't?" she asked, crossing her arms. Her brows raised as she waited for my answer. There wasn't anything specific I could do to punish her, but I knew if she upset the wrong people not only would her life here be miserable, but mine would be too.

"Just trust me," I insisted.

She scoffed loudly. "I'll be dead before I trust an Abelonian," she murmured.

The feast was being held in the gardens of the palace. Long wooden tables stretched the length of it, set up by palace staff to accommodate all the guests invited. I had to admit I was impressed. The king had pulled together a long list of guests in a short period. He hadn't held back in extravagance, already the garden was filled with at least fifty people. The night was still early, and I imagined that the number would double before food was served.

I watched as Koraine eyed up the guests like a general would their enemy, truly her father's daughter. Her stiff posture and scowl would make her stick out, if the dress didn't already. This was meant to be a celebration, and she looked miserable. I was no happier escorting her around, but at least I knew how to slap on a smile and pretend.

The king hadn't arrived yet, but that was no surprise. He'd arrive after all the guests for the meal, and leave soon after. Events like this were beneath him. He didn't have the time to deal with the complaints the nobles always brought with them when they visited the palace. Each one greedy to get their hands on more power and influence.

His absence left me time to convince my future bride to enjoy herself if she valued her life.

"Try not to look so much like you might kill a guest," I whispered to Koraine.

"I haven't decided whether I will," she answered, glaring at me, those icy blue eyes like daggers.

Why did I find myself staring into them? This woman had nothing to offer me, and yet I couldn't help but feel a little intrigued. She had yet to try anything rash, like escape, prioritizing her people above all else. We had that single thing in common, doing what was best for those we cared about.

That thought was short-lived, ruined by the duo approaching us.

"Ronan," I acknowledged.

"My prince," the man answered, bowing his head slightly. Ronan was the son of one of the noble families in Abelon. The woman on his arm must've been his newest interest. I couldn't keep up with the women he was constantly flaunting around at these events. He was just another thorn in my side to deal with. Constantly trying to weasel his way into the palace and gain favor with the royal family.

As rich as he was, I wouldn't entertain him.

"And this must be your lovely bride to be," he said, grabbing Koraine's hand before she could react. I watched her cringe as he kissed the back of it. At least she found him as repulsive as I did.

I wanted to be rid of him as fast as I could, and before Koraine decided to upset him. The last thing I needed was to owe a favor to Ronan as an apology for my unruly soon to be wife's behavior.

"We really must be greeting the rest of the guests," I said, hooking my arm around Koraine's shoulder. Guiding her away from Ronan, my muscles relaxed.

"What's his deal?" Koraine asked in a whisper. Her arms were crossed, a scowl growing.

"He's just a pretentious ass," I grumbled. "I have enough to deal with tonight. I don't need him to deal with too."

"Hmm." She seemed to consider my words. "Maybe he is someone I'd like to know." A smirk crept across her lips and I ignored it. I wasn't going to be shaken by one single woman tonight. I needed to show my father I could handle this responsibility. That I was willing to do anything for this kingdom, and that meant putting up with Koraine for a single night.

We made our way around the garden, keeping conversations short. By the time the servers were carrying out dinner, I'd introduced Koraine to almost all the attendees. Every now and then she slapped on a fake smile, and obliged to answer the noble's curious questions. It was better than I'd expected, she did know how to fool the guests even if she pushed back at me.

As the trays of food made their way out, I led Koraine to our spots at the center table. Being the guests of honor, we sat nearest the king's own chair. As we took our seats, my father made his way through the garden, trailed by multiple guards. The nobles gawked, not taking their eyes from him until he was seated.

New guests entered the garden, and I watched, realizing they were performers. Their ruby red outfits were embellished with miniscule shining gems and the tight material clung to their skin. Dispersed around the table, they set to work, showing off their best tricks. Some of them juggling items set aflame, and others twirling poles with flames on each end. Many of the guests laughed and cheered, watching them in awe.

I noticed Koraine was particularly interested in one woman. She was standing on her hands in the center of a ring of fire. Bending her body into new positions, Koraine didn't take her eyes off of her, even as I tried to pass her food.

"They're fire performers," I offered, realizing she'd probably never seen anything like this in Morwen. "Do your people have anything similar?"

She shook her head. "No, or at least never that I've seen."

It was the most information she'd been willing to offer me all night.

"Then what entertainment does your king have at his feasts?' I couldn't stop my inquisitiveness.

The feast went on for some time before the main course was brought out. A large pig roasted and placed in the center of the table, surrounded by sides of vegetables. A few other dishes were carried out alongside it and I opted for some fish I spotted on a nearby platter. Noticing Koraine eyeing my plate, I offered her some of the fish. This seemed to lighten her mood.

"These fish are a delicacy. They are the least common of what our fishermen bring in," I said, sliding some onto her plate.

"Really? Our markets are filled with these," she answered, tilting her head.

Our fishermen were no where near as skilled as those in Morwen, but I left that point out. Fire didn't mix well with water.

As the food slowly disappeared, the king stood from his seat. Raising his glass, he demanded the attention of every guest in the garden.

"As you all know, we are here to celebrate my son and his bride to be," he bellowed. "I love a good celebration, but first we must show our adoration for the goddess who allowed us to build this great kingdom long ago. To Mavalu, we send thanks. May our flames continue to burn everlasting."

"May our flames continue to burn everlasting," I repeated, along with the other guests. It was the mantra of our people.

"Now a toast," the king announced, raising a glass. "To my son and his wonderful soon to be wife. On this night, we begin the journey that will solidify your marriage and unite our kingdoms in peace." Each word echoed. I sensed Koraine tensing beside me as all eyes fell on us. Slapping on a smile, I tried to nudge her to do the same, but she remained frozen, scowling at the king.

The only responsibility he'd given me and I was already failing at it. At this rate, we wouldn't make it to our wedding day. One of us would give in

to the temptation of killing the other, saving us all the trouble of going through it.

War was inevitable, either with Morwen or my wife.

The king said a few more words that were lost to my ears, before the rest of the guests joined him in raising their glasses and drinking. The guests went back to focusing on the feast, as an array of pastries were set out by palace workers. I grabbed one, setting it on my plate. The night would be over soon, bringing us one step closer to being married. Noticing Koraine was leaning back, refusing to touch the desserts, I sighed.

"You should really try one," I offered, my tone slightly annoyed.

"I've lost my appetite," she said, turning away her nose in the air. Her eyes settled on the king, watching his every move.

Holding back the urge to snap at her, I went back to my own dessert. The strawberry pastry was both tart and sweet. The perfect combination. I let myself indulge, wishing everything could be as simple as deciding which pastry to try next. Instead, I needed to figure out what I would do with my wife to be.

I'd remained silent, not realizing I was just poking at my pastry when Koraine finally spoke again.

"Why isn't the queen around?" she asked, turning her head away from the king.

My fiery temper jumped to the surface, my skin burning. Why would she bring up my mother? A queen her people had brutally slaughtered. She had to know what she was doing. Pushing me to my limits to see at what point I would crack.

I placed my hand on hers where it rested on the table, squeezing firmly. Anyone else would think the gesture was sweet. This made her gaze snap to mine. I had her full attention.

"Do not ever let me hear you asking about the queen again," I warned in a low growl. I held her stare for a moment, preventing my flames from coming out. I couldn't let these people see the effect she had on me with only a few words. Pulling my hand back, I lifted my glass of wine, sipping the majority of it. The alcohol helped soothe the flames that were threatening to set the entire table on fire. AFTER THE FEAST, my father left. A few of the other guests began to trickle out, but many remained, enjoying the alcohol provided by the palace. There was still one person left for Koraine to meet. Guiding her, I led her over to my sister, who I'd spotted refilling her own glass with a vibrantly red wine.

I was still fuming from Koraine's comment about the queen, but I tried to brush it off for the sake of making it through the last portion of this feast.

"Koraine, this is Nyla," I introduced, startling my sister and causing her to almost spill her wine. I noticed something new flash behind Koraine's eyes. All night her face had remained hardened, but now there was more. Was that annoyance?

"Introducing me to a woman you've been with?" she questioned in a low tone, scowling.

My sister started laughing, doubling over to grab her stomach. I rolled my eyes at Koraine's baffled glance.

"Nyla is my sister," I said. Koraine's eyes widened. "Jealousy doesn't suit you."

I watched as she flinched at my words. The insult had gotten under her skin. I knew the last thing Koraine would be was jealous, but I still took the opportunity to try to gain back the upper hand. She'd continually tried to undermine me tonight.

"Even if he wasn't my brother, he's not my type," Nyla laughed, with a glance over to beautiful woman I'd spotted her talking to earlier in the night.

Koraine stalked off. I glanced at Nyla, hoping she might have some advice, but all I got was a shrug.

"She's a delight," she said, wandering off with her new glass of wine.

Rolling my eyes, I followed after Koraine. I couldn't keep a watchful eye on her if I let her roam the feast alone. There were too many important guests and the potential damage she could cause outweighed the voice in my head telling me to leave her alone. Already I was chasing after her and it'd only been a day.

As I finally caught up, I reached out, grabbing her arm to stop her from continuing her angry march. Turning, I found pure hatred in her eyes. Pulling her arm out of my grasp, she crossed them, covering the bare skin her dress left exposed on her torso. Her stubbornness knew no limit.

"Leave me alone," she said, her voice rising. Nervously, I glanced around, hoping we hadn't already caught the attention of others. "What?

You don't want your precious nobles to know how discontent I am? I'm here to produce heirs but that does not mean I have to like you, " she shouted, clenching her fists.

"That's enough," I hissed, trying to stop her from causing a commotion.

"No! I didn't ask for a welcome feast or whatever this is!" She yelled. I caught a few guests' gazes wandering our way.

"Do not test my patience here," I growled.

"Or what?" She questioned, her piercing blue eyes remaining fixed on me. I had to admit she was bold.

I was close enough that I could feel her heartbeat racing, smell the vague scent of a fresh sea breeze on her skin. I brought my hand up to her cheek, rubbing a thumb along it. "Don't make me answer that," I said, my voice low so that only she could hear me.

Koraine shivered. Dropping her gaze, she stepped back.

"I want to go back to my room now," she sighed, defeated.

Since the night was growing late, and many guests had left, I saw no issue with the request. Without a word, I started toward the palace, letting her follow me. One day in, and already things were worse than I'd expected. It was going to take a lot more effort to get Koraine to see reason. To realize that if she just cooperated her life here wouldn't be so bad until my father finally decided what would happen with her. If I had to remain married to her for years, so be it.

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KORAINE



I'd barely made it through the welcome feast, the prince nothing but infuriating all night. Bellamy was proving to be a real royal pain in my ass.

Begrudgingly, I was following him back to the palace. I had to admit; I was shocked he'd agreed to let me go back to my room. There were still guests lingering in the garden, even with midnight approaching.

We hadn't spoken a word to each other since I'd asked to return to my room.

The feast itself had been ostentatious, a few of the platters I hadn't recognized. I'd even found myself enjoying some of the food before the king's little speech. The moment he'd started the toast I'd been painfully reminded of why I was actually here.

The rest of the night had passed in a blur, as I'd sunken into my own thoughts and misery. I'd acted rash, lashing out at the prince and I prayed to Odaesia that the prince didn't punish my people for my mistake.

Sleep was the only thing I needed now. The one thing that could cure how I was feeling with dreams of home. See my family again, and the beautiful waves splashing against the coasts.

A twinge of pain stabbed at my heart as Morwen crossed my mind. Without realizing I'd slowed my pace, Bellamy was well ahead of me now. Stopping, I glanced around. I didn't recognize the part of the garden we'd ventured into. It wasn't anywhere Cyrus had taken me earlier that day. Turning back, the prince had moved out of my sight and I wasn't sure which direction he'd gone. The palace was close, but there were multiple

entrances, and I wasn't convinced I remembered the way to my chambers through any.

Panic started to sink in. I was shivering as the night had cooled, and the dress I wore provided no warmth. Venturing further into the garden, I turned right, following a path that looked like it led up to the palace. The dirt path was ruining the bottom hem of my dress as it dragged behind me. The dress hadn't been a perfect fit. It was too long, most likely made to fit the princess of Morwen.

I gathered the material in my hands, picking it up so I could walk faster. The roses lining the path smelt fragrant, I would have to come back during the daylight to pick some for my vase.

There was still no sign of the prince, and I worried what Bellamy would say when he finally tracked me down. His volatile mood made me nervous.

The sound of a twig snapping caught my attention. I paused, glancing around, but saw no one.

"Bellamy?" I whispered.

There was no response. Only the quiet breeze drifting through the garden answered me.

Turning to continue, I tripped on the skirt of my dress that I'd dropped. I stumbled, sticking my hands out in time to brace my fall. As I stood up, my palms were covered in dirt and tiny scratches. I spotted a fountain only a few feet away, spewing water out of a stone carving of a fish into a pool below. Using my ability, I pulled out some of the water and formed a bubble over one hand. Moving it to the next hand, I let the dirt wash away.

This night was turning into a complete disaster, I was already letting my kingdom down. Why couldn't I have kept my mouth shut?

"Lost?" a familiar voice asked, startling me.

As I spun around, I found myself face to face with Cyrus. He was dressed in a fancier version of his captain of the guard uniform he'd been wearing earlier in the day.

I sighed. "How'd you know?"

"Come on, I'll take you back to the feast," he offered.

"No!" I snapped, too quickly. My cheeks warmed as I hadn't meant to be so harsh. He was just doing his job. He couldn't possibly know how miserable the night had become.

"I was heading back to my room," I hurriedly offered.

"Would you like me to escort you," he said, offering an arm.

"Yes, please," I sighed with relief.

At least if I made it back to my room quickly Bellamy might not be as angry with me.

"And where exactly do you think you're going?" the last voice I wanted to hear rang through the garden from behind us.

"Prince," Cyrus acknowledged and I thought I caught a scowl flash across his face.

"Cyrus was just walking me back," I tried to explain. The look of displeasure on the prince's face made my heart race. I never should've slowed my pace from him. I'd been too lost in my own delusional daydream.

"Is that so?" Bellamy drawled.

He took a step toward us, easily towering over me. Looking down at me, I could feel him reading me, trying to gauge how honest I was being.

"I'd be glad to escort her back to her room," Cyrus offered. This seemed to shock Bellamy out of whatever he'd been searching for in my features.

"Fine," he snapped.

I was surprised. The prince didn't seem like the type to concede so easily. Would he come for me later to punish me for this? It made sense. Our rooms were attached and he could easily inflict any punishment he chose without a single soul in the palace knowing. There were plenty of ways to hurt me without it being obvious at first glance.

My chest tightened. I'd never be able to sleep, I needed to be ready if he did come for me. Every part of my body tensed with alertness.

Bellamy disappeared into the dark of the garden as we parted ways. I let Cyrus guide me back to the palace, half in a daze. I was still reeling over how I would get myself out of punishment if the prince did come to claim it. The stress ate away at me, and I didn't realize Cyrus had asked me a question until he paused, looking at me with concern.

"You alright?" he asked.

"Yeah, just tired," I said with a weak smile. I didn't want Cyrus to know the fear that plagued me deep down about the royal family. As hardened as I'd been forced to become in the past day, I still was no warrior. I knew how to defend myself, but that was it. I didn't know strategy like the prince did.

"Let's get you back to your room quickly then," Cyrus said, his smile warm.

Blindly following him, I couldn't help but glance back over my shoulder as we left the prince behind. My eyes connected with his, holding them for a moment before refocusing.

AFTER A FEW MINUTES of walking through the palace, I began to recognize some of the hallways and decor. We were nearing my room, and still I couldn't stop thinking about Bellamy. I'd be lucky if I kept the food from the feast down, as my stomach turned with nerves.

Walking one of the final halls before my room, I noticed the walls were lined with portraits. The further down the hall I got, the more recent the paintings looked. Pausing at one of the last ones, I stared at the work of art. The woman depicted was beautiful. She looked vaguely familiar.

"The queen," Cyrus said, mournful. Now I knew why she seemed familiar. Nyla was a spitting image of her mother.

"Why isn't she ever around?" I asked, my heart sinking, realizing I knew the answer.

"She died a few years ago."

We hadn't heard any announcements of the queen's passing in Morwen. Why had Abelon kept this information hidden from the other kingdoms?

Understanding washed over me as I remembered the prince's reaction at my mention of the queen. At the time, I'd blamed his outburst on him being an asshole, but now I knew I'd struck a nerve. A twinge of guilt pained my heart. I had no right to ask about his mother. Bellamy may be my enemy, but I wasn't heartless. No one deserved the pain of losing their parent.

"How'd it happen?" I asked, unable to hide my curiosity.

Cyrus cocked his head. His eyes narrowed, and he seemed to consider if my question was serious.

"You really don't know?" he asked, raising a brow.

I shook my head. Why would I know anything about the queen if Abelon had kept this a secret?

"Your people killed her during the war."

My heart sank. How had I never heard this? Had I been so consumed with my own father's injury that I'd missed the news when it was announced? Morwen's king was brutal during the war, and I couldn't

imagine he'd miss the opportunity to let his people know exactly who was responsible for Abelon's queen's death.

"That can't be," I said still in shock. My mind reeling over this information. Somehow, I knew Cyrus wouldn't lie to me about this, but it was still too hard to grasp.

"She'd been on a ship to visit a coastal city during the war to comfort the women and children there. Give them hope. The ship never even made it there. It was intercepted by a Morwen war ship."

The story made sense. It was the same unfortunate story I heard from many broken families in Morwen after the war. Parents and siblings taken too soon in the horrors of war.

My shoulders hung as I turned to continue on to my room. I shouldn't care. I should hate these people. But after almost losing my own father to war my heart sympathized with them.

Hoping to avoid the prince, I opted to use the private entrance to my room.

"Thank you," I whispered, unsure if the prince was already back to his own chambers.

"Anything you need here, just ask. I will always be around to help," Cyrus said, with a polite bow of his head.

He hurried off as I entered my room. Closing the door, I sunk against it, letting all the emotions of the night finally wash over me. The ribbons wrapped around my body felt suffocating. Anxiety rose in my chest, and frantically I began to claw at the ribbons. Undoing the tied parts and hurrying to get them off my body.

After a minute or so, I'd managed to pull the top half of the dress down. Standing, I leaned against the door as I let the dress fall from the rest of my body. I stepped out of the heaping material on the floor. My bare skin exposed, I made my way to the door that separated the prince's room and mine. Putting my ear to the door, I listened for a moment, hoping he wouldn't be there.

Silence.

The palms of my hands stung from the small cuts, and I could feel the dust I'd kicked up clinging to my skin. I needed to wash the night away before I'd be able to sleep.

Quickly I walked over to the chest I'd found my dress in. Inside I pulled out a fancy cloak to use as a robe and walked back to the door.

Slowly opening the door, I slipped out of my room. The washroom was only a few feet away between my room and Bellamy's. Tiptoeing, I quietly made my way down the hall. The door finally closed behind me and I let out a sigh of relief that I didn't run into the prince.

Inside, the washroom I found a large, circular tub sitting in the corner with three small steps leading up into it. It was golden, but on closer inspection it wasn't real gold. The metal had been painted to appear that way. On the ledge surrounding the tub were unlit candles and an array of bottles filled with fancy soaps and oils.

A soft chuckle escaped my lips as I thought about the prince using them all.

Opening one, I let the aroma fill my nose. My shoulders relaxed as I took in the scent of peppermint. It reminded me of the winter solstice celebration back in Morwen. Our family would gather in front of the warmth of a fire while snow fell outside. My mother would make us all peppermint tea, and we'd exchange gifts. The memory brought a smile to my face.

As I filled the large tub with water, I poured some of the peppermint oil in. Once full, I climbed the steps and let myself slip in. The water felt like bliss on my aching body. I could feel the dirt washing away and my tense muscles finally relaxing.

Twirling a finger in the water, I created a mini vortex on the surface, spiraling up out of the tub. Letting it drop, I formed an orb and brought it hovering close to my face. I tried to spot my reflection on the surface of the water before me. I barely recognized myself. My eyes were sunken and my cheeks pale. The exhaustion from the travel and day were wearing on me.

My own family would be horrified to see me like this. What would Caspian say? Would my mother cry to see her little girl so defeated? I didn't mull over what my father would think. I didn't care. He'd made me this way. Turned me into something hollowed.

A small tear streaked down my face. Sinking further into the water, I tilted my head back and closed my eyes. The water, the scents, everything was overwhelming me. I missed my home.

Slowly, more and more tears escaped. I tried to hold them back. I'd promised myself I'd become hardened and survive this place, but every second I sat in the water I began to doubt myself. How would I stay alive in

the fire kingdom? I was everything they hated. Everything the prince despised.

Small sobs choked me and I let go, allowing myself to feel all the worries and anxieties the day had brought. This was it. This would be the last time I allowed myself to be weak. I had to push through. If I wanted to see Morwen again, I needed to hide my fears and face my anxieties. Appear unbreakable to the royal family as I appeared their requests.

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BELLAMY



ucking Cyrus.

My fists ignited as I stormed through the palace.

He was always getting involved in my business, and now my soon to be wife had taken a liking to him. That was the last headache I needed. Together, the pair just might destroy me.

I never should've let Cyrus get a grasp on her, but Koraine had struck a nerve. I needed distance from my soon to be wife before my flames broke free.

Cyrus and I had a long history, and somehow he always weaseled his way back into my life. Now I was stuck with him as captain of the guard. What my father saw as promising in him I had no clue. He'd clawed his way to the position after his own father died in the Battle of Gila. I knew it was all a part of his ploy. He would do anything to boost his status and power in Abelon.

I made it back to my chambers in quick time, walking as though on a warpath. As the door shut behind me, I tore off the shirt that clung to my skin. The summer heat was strong, and hiding my scars from the nobles of Abelon was a complete nuisance.

Passing a long mirror, I caught a glimpse of the scars. Even after years of healing, they were still a deep hue of red. A constant reminder of what the consequence of disappointing my father would be.

Expecting silence, I was startled realizing I heard the sound of running water. My feet moved without thinking. I took steps toward the washroom, listening close for any indication of Koraine.

Standing outside the door, I heard muffled sounds. Of course Koraine would be pampering herself this late. Rolling my eyes, I began to walk away until I heard the faintest hint of a sob. I paused. Another soft sob drifted from the bathroom.

Koraine was crying.

I knew I should walk away. This was personal, and I doubted she'd be thrilled to know I heard her, but part of me couldn't move. I reached a hand out to the door handle. What was I going to do? I couldn't just let myself in there, and I was probably the last person she wanted to see right now.

Why did I even care?

Pulling back, I walked away. Quickly preparing to head to sleep, I pulled off the remainder of the ridiculous outfit I'd worn. It was by far the most uncomfortable material, and completely impractical. If I had any say, I would've worn the same thing I wore every day to complete my training and responsibilities. Parading around in finery was my least favorite duty as prince. How did some outfit make me a good leader?

Climbing into the bed, I let myself sink into the silk pillows and sheets. Minutes later, I heard Koraine slip from the washroom. My eyes were closed, and I held my breath, allowing her to think she'd slipped in and out unnoticed. Tomorrow would be a new day, and we had weeks to go before our wedding. Plenty of time for me to figure out how to end this marriage, but still protect my people.

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KORAINE



slept better than expected in the cozy little bed provided for me in my new room. The oversized sheets were plush, and the two pillows they gave me cushioned my head perfectly. I was able to doze off fast after I'd returned from my bath, unable to tell if the prince returned by the time I slipped back into my room, but if he had he didn't make it known.

Bellamy was already gone when I ventured to the washroom, and I couldn't help but feel like maybe he was avoiding me.

Thank the goddesses.

Braiding my hair in the large silver mirror that hung in the washroom, I pinned it into a spiraling updo. Small strands hung out of it, but I ignored them. There was no need to obsess over perfecting my hair. It would just end up a mess by the end of the day.

Today, I was going to be more productive. I needed to find out more about the palace and Abelon in general. I'd never gain my bearings without venturing out. I wanted to know everything there was to learn about my new home.

Back in my room, I still didn't have clothing of my own to wear.

I wondered if there were any clothing shops I could visit down in the city. For now, I just needed to find something in the trunk to wear.

Pulling out all the ridiculous and lavish items, I managed to scrape together an outfit. There was a long, linen navy skirt that I put on. There were no tops, but I decided to get creative. Finding the dress I'd worn the night before still in a heap on the ground, I extended out one of the ribbon pieces.

I pulled on the material trying to rip it, but failed.

No where in the room had the prince left me anything that could be used as a weapon. Glancing around, I spotted something better. A glass vase of flowers sat on one of the shelves in the room. Gently removing the flowers, I manipulated the water into a decorative bowl on another shelf and plopped the flowers inside. It wasn't a knife, but it would do.

I dropped the vase and watched as it shattered. Small pieces of glass scattered across the floor. Carefully, I maneuvered through the mess. I tried to push the pieces into a contained pile. Picking the sharpest piece I could find, I hurried back to the dress.

Using the glass, I ripped the long ribbon material off of the dress. Doing the same to one more, I was satisfied. I fashioned the two lengths of fabric into a makeshift top that I tied around my torso. It was a simple sleeveless top that covered my breasts and left my midriff mainly exposed.

Inside, the empty wardrobe of the room was a mirror fixed to the door. Admiring my work, I was startled by someone knocking on my door. I hadn't expected any visitors this morning.

I opened the door and standing in front of me was the same beautiful woman from the feast.

The princess, Nyla.

"Princess," I bowed my head in respect, trying my best to start over and fit my role in the palace.

"Can I come in?" she asked.

I moved out of the way to allow her into the room. She circled the space, observing my quaint little room. Pausing, she frowned at the pile of glass on the floor.

"I had to make this top," I blurted out, regretting my methods.

Turning, her eyes widened as she looked over my outfit. "You made that?" she asked, and I swore I heard a little admiration in her tone before she trained her face again.

Stay focused.

She wasn't my friend. As much as I wanted to make my life here easier, the royal family was my enemy.

"I don't have any clothing," I murmured, my eyes falling to the floor as I admitted I'd come with no possessions of my own.

"Ugh, Bellamy." She crossed her arms, rolling her eyes. "We'll fix that today!"

The princess went back to sorting through my room, picking up random necklaces and jewels from the open trunk on the floor. With every item she picked up, her face lit with delight.

"I'll take you into the city!" she finally said excitedly. "I know all the best shops for clothing."

As much as I needed a new wardrobe, I didn't want to be tethered to the princess all day. "Uh, that's really alright. I can go myself," I started.

"Nonsense!" she said, grabbing hold of my arm and tugging me along out of the room.

"Why are you helping me?" I asked.

She paused for a moment, tilting her head.

"Let's just say I'm intrigued by you. You're nothing like I expected when my father said he was bringing a Morwenian here," she explained with a shrug. "Besides, keep your friends close and your enemies closer. And I have not decided which you are yet Koraine."

My stomach turned, trapped into the offer. I was stuck with Nyla, whether I liked it or not.

The city was more expansive than I'd noticed walking from my ship the prior day. It was divided by different wealth sectors. Closer to the docks, Nyla explained, was where many of the struggling citizens lived, most of them left with little in the aftermath of war. Closer to the palace were shops where the nobles bought their finery and imported decor.

Nyla didn't take me to either of those sectors of the city. Instead, we ventured in between, to where the streets were bustling with people, and shops had vibrant little signs outside advertising everything one could imagine. One in particular displayed a vibrant blue sign naming it Flaming Fashions.

I giggled at the name. Nyla turned in my direction but didn't seem to share the same amusement.

"Trust me. This place has the best clothing in the capital," she said, ushering me inside.

As I entered, I took in the rainbow of fabrics that spread across the shop. There were rows of different styles of clothing and even shelves piled high with options. My eyes widened as I suddenly became overwhelmed.

"Don't be shy," Nyla said, giving me a gentle push forward. "Pick out whatever you want."

Suddenly, panic filled my body. I had forgotten one very important detail. Without any belongings of my own, I had no money.

"I can't buy any of this," I said, a little disappointed. I really had wanted to find clothing to fill my wardrobe.

"Why not?" Nyla crossed her arms, frowning

"I don't have money," I almost whispered.

She burst out laughing, as if the concept were a joke. Noticing I wasn't joining, she paused. "Oh, you're being serious." She grabbed my arm, pulling me further into the store. "You're the future queen of Abelon. You don't need money here. The palace will always compensate shops well for you."

The idea was ludicrous. I wanted to be able to compensate the shops myself, but without a job or family here I'd never have the money to do so. Would a few pieces of clothing really be the worst thing to accept from the palace? I didn't see the harm in accepting this one favor.

Shrugging, I accepted Nyla's pleas for me to shop and followed her further into the store.

Thankfully, the store had an array of colorful clothing, rather than the standard shades of red I noticed many in Abelon loved to show off. It would be a while before I even considered giving up the beautiful hues of blue paired with other neutral tones I was used to dressing in.

They could send me away from Morwen, but that didn't mean I would forget my culture so easily. I felt an intense need to hold tight to it. To never forget who I was, or where I came from.

After what felt like hours of searching, we left the store both with multiple new items. The shop owner had provided us with satchels to carry all of our new purchases. As we walked through the streets of Raden, I caught a quick glimpse of the sea down one of the streets we passed. Pausing, I stopped to admire it.

From this far I could just make out the ships docked in the harbor, that looked as small as a toy ship from where I stood. Closing my eyes, I imagined that I was back home, standing on the shores of Morwen. In my mind, I could envision Talay swimming through the waves, waiting for me to join him.

"Are you okay?" Nyla asked, her tone concerned. As I opened my eyes, I found her staring at me with a frown.

"Yeah, I just miss my sea serpent, Talay, is all," I said, dipping my head so the princess couldn't see the disappointment reflected in my eyes.

"Why don't you just visit him?" she asked, cocking her head.

"I can do that?" My head immediately flew up, searching her face for any hint of a lie. I hadn't thought that I'd be allowed to see my sea serpent here. I had dragged him along with me, but I assumed he'd be forced to wait a way off shore for me until I could find a way to escape the watchful eyes of the royals.

"Why not?" She shrugged.

"Can we go now?" I asked, unable to hide my hope.

"I don't see why not, as long as we don't go out too far where smugglers roam the water," the princess answered, grinning. "I've never seen a sea serpent in person before, so we'll both get something we want."

I didn't know my way through the city yet, and had to rely on Nyla to lead me through the winding streets of Raden. We passed children running through the streets, playing together. One shop we walked by had its door wide open, and inside I watched as the owner manipulated flames around metal to make a dagger.

The closer we got to the sea, the more I began to recognize the familiar scents that came with it. The crisp, salty air reminded me of home.

The docks came into view, and I watched as busy merchants loaded goods for trade onto ships. Abelon rarely traded with other kingdoms, but I recognized the flag and water drop crest on one ship.

"Is that a Morwenian ship?" I asked, hopeful.

"Yes," Nyla said. "With this new peace treaty, my father has found an opportunity for trade that benefits both our people."

It was hard to be upset, seeing firsthand the change my marriage was bringing to our kingdoms. If only this peace would last. No longer would we have to fear flames burning down our villages or the threat of war at every corner.

Walking out onto one of the smaller, empty docks, I glanced around nervously. Would Talay be here? Nyla had seemed so sure that the sea serpent had not left this area since I'd arrived, insisting on our walk that many of the fisherman had complained since the day before that the sea serpent would scare off the fish in the area. I couldn't imagine they caught much in this area, but still they needed to make a living somehow.

I made a note to tell Talay to stay further out or alternate areas. I didn't need a bigger target on my back, being the only outsider living here.

Calling out, my cheeks warmed as we gained a few confused glances our way.

"Talay!" I shouted, hoping he could hear me.

In the distance, I saw the familiar ripple of water as my sea serpent approached. He moved at impossible speeds through the waves. Swimming up to the dock, his head emerged from the water and his body remained submerged. He was long, comparable to some of the smaller ships docked.

"He's magnificent," Nyla said, wide-eyed beside me. "He's nothing like our dragons. Even his scales are different!" she marveled.

I gave a small chuckle. Her delight reminded me of the children from home who would sneak off to the coves to see the sea serpents up close. They really were a sight to behold for someone who'd never met one before. Suddenly, an idea formed in my head. I might be crazy, but I wanted to be out at sea again and this might have been my one chance for a while.

"Let's go for a ride!" I exclaimed, praying that the princess wouldn't turn down my idea. She seemed much more adventurous than I originally gave her credit for, and I only hoped that meant she'd agree. A slow grin crept across her lips, her dark eyes meeting mine.

"I know just the place we can go," she said.

"This is amazing, I've never been out this far in the sea!" Nyla shouted in disbelief from behind me. Her hands held tight to my shoulders as Talay swam on.

It was difficult getting used to the feeling of riding a sea serpent. The way they hovered above the water and waves, and moved at impossible speeds. If you weren't careful, you'd fall off. It had taken me years to feel confident on Talay.

Nyla's grip was strong, and I could tell she was hesitant about being in the water, but she tried to keep on a brave face. I didn't blame her. If my ability was fire, I'd be nervous out at sea too. Especially alone with someone from my enemy's kingdom.

"Head north, it's just a short ride along the coast!" Nyla shouted over the sound of waves and wind.

I directed Talay north and let him do the rest of the work. With the water splashing my face, and the smell of the sea filling my nose, I finally felt myself again. This is where I was meant to be. This was the one place Abelon could never take from me.

As we rounded a corner of the coast, I immediately noticed the barren land. What had been green and lively only moments before now looked like desolate grounds.

"Over there," Nyla said, pointing over my shoulder to a small dock on shore.

I urged Talay to head toward the dock. It only took a minute before our feet were on solid ground once more. The sand beneath my feet was black, and beyond the beach I could only see dead lands. No trees or plants anywhere to be found. I glanced around in confusion, convinced I had missed something. In the distance, I spotted multiple dark mountains, one of which had liquid flames melting down its steep sides.

A volcano.

Overhead, a shadow hid the sun for a moment, before it appeared again. Shielding my eyes, I glanced up. A vibrant green dragon flew by, aiming for the distant mountains. I wasn't sure if they were all volcanoes, but not a single one seemed to support life.

"What is this place?" I asked in disbelief.

"Fyre Cove," Nyla answered. "It's where our dragons reside."

I blinked in disbelief, more dragons flew in the distance over the mountains. Each of them had uniquely vibrant colors and varying sizes. A small black dragon caught my eye. It was following a larger one, mimicking its movements, a baby learning to fly.

Nyla used her fingers pressed to her lips to sound out a loud whistle, startling me. As soon as she did, a dark red dragon came barreling in our direction from the sky. I prepared to run, as I felt its gaze lock on me. At the last moment, it pulled to the right, avoiding me and landing on the beach.

"Veros!" Nyla exclaimed. "This is my dragon, Veros. She's friendly, I promise."

The dragon let out a loud growl.

"Well, at least to those I tell her to be friendly to." Nyla shrugged.

As the princess said it, I felt the dragon eye me. It looked like the beast was deciding if I was today's meal. Finally, she dropped her gaze, deciding I wasn't worth the hassle. I let out my breath, relieved that I would live another day.

In the distance, another dragon caught my eye, circling closer to us.

"Imry?" I questioned, my intrigue distracting me from the beast beside me.

"Yeah, that's Bellamy's dragon. She isn't as friendly as Veros. Without him around, there's no telling how she'd react to you. I would keep my distance from her," the princess said, seeming a bit weary herself of the large beast.

After a moment of watching Nyla greeting her dragon, stroking the beast's scales, I found the nerve to ask the question that had been bothering me since we'd arrived.

"Why is the land like this?" I asked. Was this the only type of land dragons could survive on?

"This is the truth behind Abelon," Nyla said slowly. She seemed hesitant to share more. "As it's future queen, I assumed you'd eventually learn. Most of our lands are covered in flames, uninhabitable. The coast is where many of our people safely reside. Other kingdoms are so greedy, wanting what we have, but we already have so little. What're we supposed to do?"

I heard the hidden message beneath what she said. Nyla didn't expect me to go back to Morwen.

Her words sunk in, Abelon was nothing like I'd been taught. No one beyond these borders knew the secret it held. That its lands were nothing but fire and ash, plagued with volcanoes and rivers of flame. How could these people live like this and never share their pain with the world? Had war always been on the horizon for so long that they felt they must keep this secret?

I was finally getting somewhere in my attempts to learn more about Abelon. I tucked the little piece of knowledge away in my head for later as I pretended to listen to Nyla rambling on about her dragon. Abelon was not the stronghold it wanted the rest of the kingdoms to believe it was.

BELLAMY



night after a feast was always a time where there was plenty of left over food to be found. That was the exact reason I found myself in the royal kitchen early the next morning.

"I had a feeling you'd come," a raspy old voice said from behind me, startling me. Turning, I found one of the palace cooks, Ervin, standing behind me.

The stout old man had worked at the palace since before I was even born. He was the only one I trusted wouldn't report to my father where I'd been taking food off to. During the war, he'd lost family members of his own and I could tell he had a soft spot for the orphans I was feeding.

"I already set aside a basket of food I knew wouldn't be missed," he said with a wink, stroking his gray goatee. "I even threw in some of the fruit pastries for the little ones."

Noticing the basket on one of the wooden tables, I gave a nod of thanks. I needed to hurry this morning. After how the feast went, I was sure my father would want to see me today.

I only hoped my father had mercy on me and I wouldn't be punished for my future wife's disobedience.

Grabbing the basket, I went to leave the kitchen. The sun was rising, and I was already losing valuable time.

"Hold on a moment," Ervin said. "Take this with you for Mariam and Alaric. Trust me, those two overwork themselves. This will help them relax," he explained, handing me a bag of tea leaves.

"Thank you," I said.

"Give Alaric my best, and don't let the old bastard give you too much trouble," he said, with a deep chuckle, carrying on with his breakfast duties.

Leaving, I made my way out of the palace through a lesser known side entrance. I knew all the ways in and out of the palace grounds. It was part of my responsibilities as prince to have a vested interest in the palace security. I also didn't trust the job completely to Cyrus, finding him incompetent at being anything other than a nuisance.

I nodded to one of the guards on duty as I passed through the flames of the eastern gate. I had less than an hour to deliver the food and make it back to begin my morning training on time. If I was late, my father would notice.

At a brisk pace, I walked through the streets of Raden.

This early in the day, the streets were practically empty. Only a few shop owners wandered before opening their doors. The delicious smells of bakeries beginning their morning orders wafted in the air. Unfortunately, there was no time to stop.

By the time I'd made it to the lower levels of the city, the pinks and oranges of sunrise were fading into the vibrant blue of daytime. The skies were clear, and a slight breeze brushed against my skin. A perfect day for flying. If I had time later in the day, I'd have to take Imry out for a ride.

I could use her to scare some sense into Koraine. I'd seen the way her eyes widened with terror seeing Imry at the palace. She'd never seen a dragon before. Imry was a fierce beast and only listened to my command. If I allowed her to, she'd burn Koraine alive. Although, that would be incredibly hard to explain to Morwen if they came looking for her.

Finally, I found myself at the door of the orphanage. Before I could even knock, the wooden door flew open and Alaric dragged me inside.

"What are you doing here?" he scolded.

I hesitated, trying to figure out if I'd misheard the outrage in his tone. Alaric may not love visitors, but he had never once turned away the food I brought for the children.

"I brought leftovers from the feast that was held at the palace last night," I answered hesitantly.

"I knew the moment I heard about that feast that you'd turn up here today. We no longer want your charity," the man spat, his temper only worsening.

I didn't understand what I'd done for him to turn on me like this. Was this about Koraine? I knew it would be hard to convince the people of Abelon that this marriage was what was best, but I never imagined Mariam and Alaric would be a challenge.

"Listen, if this is about my future wife-"

"You seriously don't know what you did, do you?" he asked, his eyes widening in disbelief. The rise in his voice had alerted Mariam to my arrival, and I watched as she slipped into the room sheepishly. It was unusual that she'd allow Alaric to speak to me this way.

"They killed Kane!"

Kane? Who was Kane?

I tried hard to remember if any of the children at the orphanage were named Kane, but I couldn't recall anyone I'd ever met with that name. If Alaric was this worked up over the death, he had to be someone important. Why couldn't I remember?

"You don't even know who I'm talking about do you?" Alaric half chuckled, half yelled. "That's rich!"

"I'm sorry, I have no idea who you're talking about," I tried gently. I could tell that in some way Alaric blamed me for this person's death. How could that even be possible if I'd never met them?

"They whipped him with flames, and left him to die in the streets," Mariam whispered, grief plastered to her face.

"Left who?" I asked.

"Last time you were here you bumped into a man on the way back to the palace. You gathered quite the crowd. You left his fate to the patrolling guards!" Alaric bellowed.

"I couldn't do anything about that." I suddenly felt defensive. Allowing the guards to handle the situation was the right choice. There needed to be order within the city. If I allowed disrespect from one citizen, they all would turn on me. I had enough working against me with Koraine.

"He died," Mariam whispered, tears forming in her eyes. "They left him there, in the streets with burn wounds beyond any healer's capabilities. He had a family, Bellamy. By the time we all were able to carry him home, he barely had enough strength to say goodbye to his children." The tears began streaking down her face.

"I didn't know-" I started, but Alaric didn't let me continue.

"Of course you didn't! You couldn't be bothered to handle your own problems. Was it really necessary to whip him for his words?"

"You don't understand the pressure I'm facing currently. I had to maintain order," I tried, but it was no use. Mariam and Alaric were looking at me with a hatred I had never seen before. A small pain in my chest pestered me. I'd been here to help, and all I had done was cause more discourse.

"What do you know about pressure and struggles?" the old man suddenly exploded. "You live in that fancy little palace that watches over all of us down here who are unworthy. Considered not even worth a gold coin. Your father continues to use us and then leaves us here to rot!"

"He protects his people," I defended, but my voice wavered. I hoped Alaric didn't catch the falter in my confidence.

"Protects?" the old man laughed. "That bastard bleeds us dry. You are more of a fool than I thought if you truly believe he does all of this from the kindness of his heart."

What other option was there? How could my father keep Abelon's secrets from the world and prevent other kingdoms from invading if he didn't rule with a strong hand? These people didn't understand. All they saw was the lack of food and poverty and needed someone to blame. If they wanted to be angry, they should direct it towards our enemies.

"I think you should just go," Mariam said, unable to meet my gaze.

"Please, Mariam. I'm sorry," I said. Part of me wanted to fix this, but I didn't know how to make it right. She just turned her cheek at my plea.

"You are no longer welcome here," Alaric said, grabbing the basket from where I'd dropped it on a nearby table. "You have a minute to get out, and I never want to see your face in this part of the city again!"

Without any idea of how to make things better, I gave up and left. The weight of reality hung heavy on my shoulders as I made my way slowly back to the palace.

Training left me completely exhausted. I'd poured in more energy than I had in a long time. Many of the targets spread across the training courtyard were left smoldering, burnt to the point they were unusable. I was running out of targets to take my frustrations out on.

There were so many emotions pouring through me, and I needed to work through them. I was frustrated with how the feast had ended. I never should've let Koraine go with Cyrus, she was to be my wife. He was going to ruin all of my efforts.

I was also still frustrated by Alaric's accusations. What did the old man even know? He had no idea what it was like trying to run this kingdom, what it took to keep these people safe. Sacrifices were necessary.

I still felt horrible that allowing the guards to handle the situation had led to the man's death, but no matter how many times I replayed that day in my mind I still couldn't think of a better way to avoid it all.

As my chest heaved, I continued to set targets on fire as I threw flames over and over. Sweat was beading on my forehead, and I could feel myself slowing down with each strike. Dust kicked up from the ground, clinging to my skin, and shirt.

A sound behind me paused my current bombardment of flames. The entry to the training courtyard was covered by an overhang, and underneath someone stood in the shade, watching. Squinting my eyes, the sun obscuring my view, I found Koraine watching me.

"Why don't you stop lurking over there and say whatever it is that has you scowling at me like that," I demanded. Koraine hadn't done anything to provoke me, but that didn't stop me, I needed someone to release my frustrations at, and she'd stepped right into my line of fire.

"Do you make a habit of incinerating all of your training targets? Seems wasteful to me," Koraine said, walking toward me.

"Well no one is brave enough to spar with me, so targets will have to do," I said, throwing another stream of fire at one.

"I'll spar with you," Koraine retorted, hands on her hips.

"You don't want to do that," I scoffed, doubting she would be able to keep up.

"Actually, I do," she huffed, her brows furrowing.

"Fine, but don't say I didn't warn you. I'm not going to hold back on you." My body ached for a release, and fighting was one of the few solutions. If Koraine was so eager to pick a fight, then I would oblige her.

She moved into position across from me, holding her arms up ready. I caught the quick movement of her eyes to a barrel of drinking water.

Shit, she had plenty of water here.

She struck with precision, aiming low and fast for my legs. The water flew from the barrel under her control, sweeping at me. I jumped over the whip of water, throwing a stream of flame in her direction. To her credit she rolled out to the way, already lasting longer than I'd predicted.

Someone had taught her to fight. This wouldn't be as easy as I'd assumed.

Moving closer, she manipulated the water like a barrier wrapping around her body. It would be hard to land a direct blow with my flames with the water there to meet it. I need to force her to use the water, and bide my time until there was an opening.

Mustering up more energy, I threw flame after flame in her direction, hoping to tire her out. If this was a battle of endurance, I would hold out until the very end.

I pushed inward, sending fire in a trail across the ground. It bit at her feet, and she swept water beneath her to stop it. She urged the water into separate orbs, freezing them in the air. Suddenly, the frozen balls of ice hurled toward me.

I built up a large wall of flames in time before they reached me, melting each of them. This was my chance. As she worked to create more ice, I sent a whip of fire in her direction knocking her over. I ran, seizing the opportunity and knocked her down with another flame as she moved to stand.

Quickly, I climbed over her, pinning her down.

"This is over," I said, through labored breathes.

She bucked her hips, trying to free herself, but I only held tighter. The rise and fall of her chest skimmed my own with each breath she took. The fire in her gaze grew with each passing second.

I wanted her to give in, to forfeit the fight, but she was still wiggling under my grasp.

"Just give up," I said, unsure if I was talking about our sparring or more than just that.

"Never," she spat, unyielding determination written across her face.

Our eyes held, and my muscles tensed as I searched for something in her gaze. What did I expect to see? Koraine held no answers for me, she was forced here the same as I was forced to accept her arrival. We were just pawns in a bigger game. I admired it, the way she hadn't let Abelon break her spirits yet, but I needed her to give in. This was how I would help my people, ones like Kane who spited the royals and suffered because of our lack of resources. This was how I would win my father's approval.

Something swelled in my chest, as I looked her over. Her white hair fell into her faces, the strands wet with sweat from the heat of the day and fighting. Our labored breaths were slowing coming down from the high of our spar.

For a moment, I wanted to apologize for taking out my frustrations on her. What happened with Kane was not her fault, and Koraine was turning out to be more than I expected from a Morwenian.

Pushing me off, she quickly stood up, pulling me away from the thought.

Koraine hurried back into the palace, without a second glance at me. My eyes never left her, as she stormed inside. I brushed off the moment as nothing more physical attraction, unable to deny the beauty of my future wife.

Turning my own attention back to the targets, I used the last of my energy to train a few more minutes.

If I didn't stop soon, I'd be sore the next day.

I didn't care.

I wanted to feel something. If pain and exhaustion were the only things I could cause myself, besides the crippling anxiety that was holding me down then so be it. All of my worries were starting to manipulate me. I was obsessing over pleasing my father, becoming heir to the throne of flames, and keeping my future wife in line.

"My prince," a timid voice said from behind me.

Turning, I found one of the younger guards watching me nervously.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but your father requests your presence."

Throwing one last flame at one of the targets set up, I let out a frustrated growl. The guard hurried off, unwilling to wait to see if my temper would subside.

Marching through the palace, I noticed most of the workers were avoiding me. They kept their eyes down and hurried by in the halls. The heat of my temper was pouring from me, and no one wanted to be caught in its path. I needed to calm myself down before reaching my father. If he could sense how unsettled I was, it would only make things worse.

Pausing as I reached the throne room door, I took deep breaths. "You can conquer this, these feelings are only temporary," I whispered to myself, after ensuring no one was around.

It was a phrase my mother used to use when I was younger. My anxiety had been much harder to handle back then. Always worried I would disappoint my father and constantly fearing the punishments that would follow. She'd given me a way to conquer that fear and push forward.

My heart ached thinking of the memory. My mother would've had a solution for everything. The people of Abelon had loved her. No matter how much they despised the royal family or my father's rule, no one could resist the kindness of the queen.

Pushing the doors open, I found my father seated on his throne, with varying flames flickering behind him. His head was propped on one hand, and he already looked displeased to see me.

"Father," I bowed my head, waiting for his response.

"Rise," he said disinterested. "I don't have time to waste today."

I swallowed, I could sense the way his temper was hovering between control and ready to explode any moment.

"Last night was less than satisfactory. That future wife of yours has quite the mouth on her. I heard reports this morning of the argument you two had at the end of the feast, and don't think I missed the way she looked pained through the entire event. For this to work, we need her to look the part. We need our people to believe this is for the best. Instead, they already think we've invited our enemy to walk all over us. It makes us look weak," he finished, crossing his arms.

"I'm sorry, Father. It won't happen again. I'll control her," I offered. Apologizing was the only thing that might keep me from punishment.

"Sorry is not enough. Either you get control of your wife immediately, or I will have to consider other options. Do not disappoint me."

I knew what other options meant. It would entail more lessons for me to learn, new scars, and the torture of Koraine until she was submissive. As much as I despised her presence here, I knew what my father's lessons and torture were like and I wouldn't wish that on Koraine. It would break her.

"If she is so much work why don't we send her back? Make them send us someone who is more obedient of a wife?" I asked.

"We need her. I am not marching back to Morwen and admitting one woman is too much for us to handle," my father said sternly. There was no

room for argument. His say was final, and his decision was made. "If you cannot handle her, you cannot handle running this kingdom."

"Why do we need her so badly?" I questioned hesitantly. Anxiety filled my chest as I waited for him to lash out. To punish me for such a futile question.

"Because she's going to help us finally win power over Morwen. If we can break her to support us, then we'll have Morwen on their knees in no time," he said confidently.

My mouth almost fell open. He couldn't be serious.

There was no sense arguing further. Assuming that was all, I went to leave. I needed time before seeing Koraine again to decide how I would begin convincing her cooperation was in her best interest.

"I have another task for you," the king said, before I could leave. Turning, I waited patiently to hear his new request. "Our spies in Luheo report the kingdom is preparing a strike against us come late autumn. Their king is unhappy that we have chosen to enter peace negotiations with Morwen, and not them. They are planning a retaliatory strike on our coastal towns. I want you to lead an offensive against their forces. Stop them before they can reach us. You'll leave in a few weeks once preparations are complete," the king explained.

"Yes, Father," I said, bowing my head before turning once again.

This was everything I'd been hoping for, and somehow it didn't feel anything like I thought. All my life I wanted my father to acknowledge me. I wanted to make him proud, be a worthy heir to his throne, and now he was trusting me with this task. Leading an offensive was no small thing. It was my chance to prove I could lead our people.

Nerves interrupted any excitement I felt. If I messed this up, there would be no returning from it. My father would never allow me to lead his people again. I needed to be flawless, not a single mistake. And I needed to ensure we did enough damage to Luheo that they couldn't retaliate.

I would burn our enemies to the ground for my people. All that would remain would be the ashes blowing in the winds, warning the other kingdoms of what was to come if they moved against us.

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KORAINE



ays had passed since the feast, and my future husband was still avoiding me after our spar. I'd hurried off after my defeat, unwilling to stick around. The way the prince had run his gaze over me, made my heart pick up in pace, and I couldn't convince myself it was fear that had sparked it.

My only company since was Nyla, and as much as I hated to admit it, she was growing on me. I was still weary of her intentions but I couldn't deny her company was welcomed.

Growing up the daughter of a prominent general, I spent my life surrounded by men. All of us had been homeschooled rather than attending one of the schools in Alua or nearby. My father had believed in balancing our book studies with war studies. Mostly it was to the benefits of my brothers, but occasionally he let me jump in to the action too. Otherwise, it was learning how to tend to battle wounds, especially burn wounds.

Already a week had flown by being trapped in this kingdom.

Today, I was trying to memorize all the floors of the palace, but was continually getting turned around. The layout made no sense. The moment I thought I knew where the next hallway would lead, it was either a dead end or another surprise.

Already, I'd found multiple dining rooms, a forge, and a training courtyard. The first floor of the palace was the easiest to navigate. That's where the kitchen, access to the gardens, the ballroom, and throne room all were. As I ascended, the floors became more complicated.

My favorite room I'd found so far was a small library close to where my own room was. It was peaceful inside. I hadn't expected to find such a simple room in the palace. Books were piled high on old bookshelves, and there were a few desks scattered around the space. A few palace workers wandered through the stacks, organizing books. They seemed unbothered by my presence. After, almost an hour of exploring through the books, I decided to move on. I'd come back to the room soon enough.

I was now on what I believed to be the last floor to explore, aside from the multiple tall towers scattered around the palace. Many of those were locked or off limits. The only other place I hadn't been to was the palace dungeons. Even if I was allowed, there was no way I would tempt fate by going. I didn't need the royal family changing their minds about my freedom.

The top floor was less populated than the others. I'd run into many guards and palace workers, but up here was eerily empty. The halls were long, and there weren't many doors to poke around in.

"And where do you think you're off to?" Cyrus's voice caught me off guard.

I'd been pulling on a jammed door, and looked up, my stomach sinking. My cheeks warmed as I saw the questioning look on his face.

"Exploring," I said, trying to calm my breathing. Cyrus chuckled, watching me try to pry the stuck door open.

"You're never going to get that old thing open," Cyrus said. "And I'm pretty sure this closet is not something you care to see."

Letting go of the handle, I took a step back. I hadn't encountered many closets throughout the palace. This would be an odd place for one, but I supposed it made sense why the thing wouldn't budge. If it was old and unused, it probably rusted itself shut.

"Why are you up here?" I asked skeptical of how he'd known I'd be up here.

"It's my job," he shrugged. "I do have to make rounds on top of being captain. Plus, I was on my way to visit Nondaar."

"Nondaar?"

Why didn't I recognize that name?

"Want to meet him?" Cyrus offered, extending an arm to lead me. His warm smile was inviting, small dimples appearing on his cheeks as his lips curved. It was the first time I'd noticed them. They made him look more approachable, his fancy guard uniform deterring most people.

Taking his arm, I followed. It was strange trusting Cyrus enough to lead me. Over and over, I had to remind myself that he was still my enemy. No matter how kind he was, or how many favors he offered, he was still a loyal subject of Abelon. He would turn me over without a second thought.

Survival was my only goal.

Navigating down the long halls, I was beginning to wonder if he was leading me anywhere at all. I swore we were traveling in a large circle, every hall on the top floor looked exactly the same. Barren grey walls and black tiled floors with no distinct markers or decor. Finally, Cyrus paused at a door. It was different from the others I'd seen. It was bulkier and sturdier. It didn't match the other old wooden doors. This one seemed newer.

Prying it open, Cyrus had to work hard to pull the heavy door. I was impressed by his pure strength, making it look almost effortless, even though I spotted the strain in his muscles.

As it opened, the wind slammed into my face. The warm summer breeze felt stronger this high up. Once the door was fully opened, it revealed a large empty platform. At the end, there was no railing or anything to prevent someone from falling. Instead, it was just one long drop off.

Cyrus stepped out, walking toward the middle. Using his fingers, he whistled loudly. I'd seen Nyla do the same to call Veros.

In the distance, I watched the clouds waiting for a beast to descend. After a moment, I thought maybe I'd been wrong.

As I was about to ask Cyrus, a disturbance to the clouds caught my attention. Suddenly, the white clouds parted, allowing a large navy beast to fly through. Its gaze was locked on us, and it turned its nose down to land. At the last moment, it pulled up, slowing with its outstretched wings. Landing gracefully, the dragon nudged Cyrus.

"Meet Nondaar," Cyrus said with a proud smile.

"You have a dragon too?" I asked wide-eyed. This creature was magnificent up close. Its navy scales the same color as the depths of the ocean. For the first time since encountering dragons, I didn't shy away from Nondaar. The dragon seemed unbothered by my presence, ignoring me in trade for affection from Cyrus.

"I'm captain of the guard. Did you think the king would let me be without a dragon?"

He was right. The question was silly.

I kept my distance from the dragon, watching as Cyrus stroked him. Part of me was weary that the beast would change its mind about me. The other part was not willing to move so close to the ledge. As someone raised and grounded to water, I hated being this high up. There was no sea or dragon below to catch me if I fell.

"You can come see him," Cyrus offered.

"I'm alright," I said shyly.

"Seriously, I doubt you've ever had the chance to meet a dragon like this." He was partially right. I'd met Nyla's, but even she hadn't been trusting enough to let me too close.

"Goddesses don't let me fall," I murmured, letting go of the doorframe my hands grasped. Walking a few steps the open air brushed against my skin. A shiver ran down my spine, either from nerves or the cool wind. I took slow, little steps toward Cyrus. Even with plenty of space on the platform, I still felt sick to my stomach seeing how high up I was.

"Careful you wouldn't want to fall," a dark, familiar voice warned from behind me. Slowly, I turned, careful not to move too fast on the platform even though I was far from the edge. Bellamy was watching me with the focus of a predator, and my heart picked up in pace.

"What do you want?" I asked, rolling my eyes and trying to hide the effect his presence had on me. I hadn't spoken to him much in days and this was all he had to say. I was surprised he hadn't just pushed me right off the ledge.

Behind me, Nondaar huffed his distaste, not a fan of the prince's presence either. Talay always could sense how I felt about others, and I assumed it was similar with dragons and their rider. I knew Cyrus and Bellamy had some history together, but I still had no idea why they disliked each other.

I doubted Bellamy would ever tell me, and it felt too personal to ask Cyrus.

"Dinner," Bellamy said, snapping me from my thoughts, his gaze raking over me.

"What?" I asked surprised, taking a few steps back to the door.

"Tonight, you will dine with me," Bellamy stated, not a single emotion written on his face.

"And if I refuse?" I asked, gaining my confidence back the closer I got to the door again.

"You won't." He started to leave and I wondered if I would regret if I agreed to this meal.

"And don't make a habit of coming up here. I won't have my wife recklessly killed from falling," the prince said almost possessively. Why did he care what happened to me?

AFTER THE ORDEAL WITH BELLAMY, Cyrus had walked me back to my room. The journey back was long and uncomfortable. Cyrus hadn't pried, or asked anything about the prince, but I could tell he wanted to. Even if he had asked, there would've been nothing to share. I knew as little as he did, if not less, about the prince's intentions.

I finally made it back to my room, thanking Cyrus as I shut my door. I needed time alone, to prepare both mentally and my appearance before dinner. The clothing I'd worn was not appropriate for dining with the prince. Even if I didn't care to impress him, the more I pushed back against his expectations the worse off I'd be in Abelon and the more danger my people would be in. If I was stuck, I needed him to at least tolerate my presence.

Digging through my wardrobe, I found a simple, light blue dress to wear. It fell to my ankles, and the back was almost non-existent, showing off my skin from my shoulders down to my lower back. A thin string tied around my neck to hold the dress up.

I tied it off quickly and found a simple pair of grey sandals to slide on. Glancing in the mirror, my hair was a mess. The wind on the platform had blown it into a tangled knot. A small, frustrated grumble left my mouth as I searched for a brush.

I didn't have much time left before I'd be expected at dinner.

I rushed through brushing out the tangles, and by the time I'd finished, my hair looked even worse than before. I needed to pull it up or look like a fool. Pulling back my hair, I separated it into three sections. Braiding the pieces, I tied it off with a white ribbon I found.

It wasn't perfect, but it would have to do.

A knock came at my door soon after. I found a shy young guard waiting outside.

"The prince sent me to escort you," he explained. I followed his lead. There was none of the small talk I at least got with Cyrus. Just complete silence.

Arriving in the dining room, I recognized it from my earlier ventures in the day. It was one of the smaller dining rooms, less fancy than the ones used for special occasions. At one end of a black table sat the prince. He had a glass of wine in his hand, swirling the contents inside. The red liquid was mesmerizing to watch as it moved.

My escort hurried off without a word.

"You came," the prince observed.

"Mhm," I said, unwilling to show him he had any control over me. I wanted him to believe that coming was my own choice, not because he had demanded it.

I made my way down the table, passing by a marble bust of a king. I paused to look at it, realizing it was Bellamy's father. Everywhere I went in this palace, I was painfully reminded I was under his watchful eye. One wrong step and my people were condemned to war.

Sitting beside him, I grabbed one of the bottles of wine sitting on the table. There was no need for the dainty glass at my place. If I was going to make it through this dinner with him, I needed the bottle.

"So you drink," the prince observed. I couldn't tell if he was disgusted, or a bit impressed with my approach to the alcohol.

"Will the food be served soon?" I asked, noticing not a single plate had been brought out yet, only silverware sat on the table. I had yet to see a single palace worker walk through the dining room.

"It will come soon enough, but why rush? I thought we could get to know each other," he explained, finishing with a sip of his wine. A slight laugh escaped my lips. "Is that amusing to you?"

"You dragged me to this kingdom. Forced me to attend your ridiculous feast, and then ignored me for almost an entire week after I spar with you, and now you just want to get to know each other? I think we skipped past that formality."

"Fair point," he said, scowling. "But I want to know who I'm marrying."

There wasn't a lot I wanted to share with Bellamy. If I discussed Morwen with him, I could accidentally reveal valuable information about the kingdom and landscape that he could use against it. Talking about my

family was off limits, I didn't want him to use them against me the way the king of Morwen was prepared to. They were in enough danger already.

"What if I don't want to share anything? Will you force me?" I dared to ask, defiance in my words. Bellamy thought he had the control here, but I wasn't ready to give up everything so easily. There was still a lot I could do without refusing his requests, like this dinner. I looked at it as an opportunity. See how far my freedom went, and learn more about the prince.

"Lets make it a game." A devious grin curled his lips. His dark gaze held my own. If he wasn't my enemy I might find him attractive, tempting even. But this man would someday take his father's place. He would make decisions that could wipe out my people.

He grabbed his own bottle of wine, ditching the glass he'd been sipping from.

"If you don't wish to answer my question, you drink. Same goes for me," he explained. I'd played similar games with my brothers before. The stakes were a bit higher here. If I wanted him to answer anything, I'd have to give a little myself.

"Why did you agree to have dinner with me?" he asked, jumping right into it.

Easy.

"I didn't feel like I had another option," I said nonchalantly. It was a portion of the truth. Enough so that it seemed to satisfy him.

Leaning back he said, "There's always an option."

What did that mean? I didn't have an option when I was shipped here like a good to be traded.

"Why didn't you speak to me for a week?" I asked. It wasn't anything important, but I had to start somewhere.

"I was busy," he shrugged.

"That's not an answer and you know it," I retorted. This game was useless if he continued giving answers like that. "Drink," I demanded.

His lips pulled up into a quick smile.

Without protest, he took a large sip from the bottle of wine, holding my gaze while he did so. As he placed it down, he seemed to think over his next question.

"You look nice tonight," he said. Was that a compliment? Maybe the prince had drank more wine than I'd realized before I arrived.

"That's not a question."

"What? I can't compliment my wife?" he asked, crossing his arms. I noticed he was again wearing a shirt with sleeves even in the brutal summer heat that still plagued the kingdom. It was strange. Maybe his heart of ice kept him colder than I knew.

"I'm not your wife." There were still weeks until our fates would be tied forever.

"Not yet," he shrugged. His change in demeanor toward me had me on edge. Why was he being so cordial?

"It's your question," I said.

"Why'd you agree to leave Morwen?" he asked. I could tell him the truth. Knowing my own king forced me here risked nothing, but somehow it felt personal.

Sharing that I had no control over my own future made me feel weak. Bellamy may think nothing of it, but still I couldn't bring myself to tell him. Instead, I took a large swig of the wine. The bitter notes of grapes hitting my throat.

"Interesting," he murmured.

As I placed the bottle down, I accidentally placed it on top of the end of my fork and it tipped. As it fell, wine splashed out, but before it could land on the table or floor, I stopped it. Manipulating the water within the liquid mixture, I urged it back into the bottle I'd picked back up. I found the prince's eyes settled on me, watching intensely.

"How?" he asked, furrowing his brows.

"It's mostly just water in there," I shrugged.

I could manipulate mixtures if they were composed of mainly water. The skill was useless beyond preventing spills. Satisfied with my answer, Bellamy leaned back into his seat.

"Why do you always wear long sleeves?" I asked the question not meaning it to be the one I used as my turn. I was curious. Every other man around the capital and in the palace dressed in short sleeves. Even the guards left their arms exposed. The heat was brutal, and long sleeves would only slow people down. There also was the risk of heat exhaustion and illness.

The prince's eyebrows furrowed. After a moment, he took another large sip from his bottle.

Odd.

There was more to Bellamy than I'd assumed. He wasn't just the pompous, evil prince I'd expected. Rather, he was a complicated individual, with many layers of secrets. I would crack each one open before I married him. I had to.

"Do you have any siblings?" He asked, changing the subject.

Again I drank, knowing my choice was answer enough for him. I couldn't tell him about Caspian and Emmett. Even if I trusted Bellamy, thinking about my family was too painful. I had promised myself I would protect my heart. Keep a hardened shield around it. I wasn't ready to confront the pain of those I left behind just yet.

Bellamy studied me, expecting this to be an easy question for me. Suddenly, understanding seemed to dawn on him.

"You think I'd harm them?" he asked. The question wasn't a part of the game, genuine surprise taking over his features. "I would never harm them. I wouldn't stoop so low as to murder innocent families," he said, his tone darkening.

I almost forgot about his own mother. She'd been murdered to get at his family. I hadn't meant my silence to be an insult.

I went to apologize but was disrupted. A few palace staff appeared carrying plates of food toward us. I recognized cooked beef and sides of vegetables. It smelt delectable.

"Bellamy-"

"Don't," he said, no longer in the mood for conversation.

The rest of the dinner was spent in silence. Even with how delicious the food looked, I barely ate any of it. Pushing a few carrots aside, I felt guilty. I wanted Bellamy to know I had no idea about his mother before I came here, but he didn't want to hear it. He wouldn't allow me the chance to tell him.

After eating, the prince excused himself, leaving me alone. I knew my way back to my room, but I didn't move. Sitting at the table, I took another large sip of the wine. My body felt warm from the effects of the alcohol. I no longer wanted to feel the stress and anxiety of the day. Instead, I needed a distraction.

With a few more sips, my eyes grew heavy. Finally, I gave in to the call of sleep, heading back to my own room. Tomorrow would bring another day, and another chance for me to figure out what I was going to do in Abelon.

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BELLAMY



nother week of short conversations in passing with Koraine, and I still had no idea how I was going to accomplish what my father wanted. Spending time with her seemed to make things worse. Not that I was jumping at the opportunity to see her either. She despised me, the way I did her, but if I didn't act soon, my father would be displeased.

Memories of hot metal chains flashed through my mind, and it was enough for me to decide I'd seek out Koraine again. I was willing to try for the sake of my people.

My dinner with her had gone entirely wrong. I had only made her distrust me more with my questions, and I'd let my emotions get the best of me when she insinuated I would harm her family. I was nothing like her ruthless people. The loss of my own mother was still a fresh wound. One that bothered me more than I cared to admit.

I should've restrained myself. Hid my reaction. She would never view me as a leader to respect and husband to listen to if I kept having outbursts like this. I just couldn't help it, the woman was able to get under my skin so easily and it was hard to douse my fiery temper.

I'd heard her leave her room in the early morning, and wasn't quite certain where she'd gone off to.

There was a war meeting set for the morning, and after that I'd find Koraine. That gave me just enough time to think of a way to convince her to tolerate me. My mind was at war with itself. Everything I'd learned about Morwen and its people warned me not to get close, to despise everything Koraine was. Yet, it was the only way to accomplish what my father had asked of me.

Why couldn't it be simple?

Heading to the war meeting, I tried to clear my head of any thoughts of Koraine. Right now, I needed to be focused. This meeting was to plan preparations for the attack on Luheo. Keeping my kingdom safe was my highest priority. I wouldn't fail at this.

The throne room doubled as a space for the meeting, with a low table dragged in by some of the palace workers. Many of my father's advisers already sat at the cushioned seats placed around the table on the ground. In the center of them all, a large map of the kingdoms was spread for all to read.

Each of the advisers gave a respectful nod in my direction as I entered. My father had not arrived yet.

After a few minutes of silence, the king finally graced us with his presence. I had a feeling he'd purposely made us wait. Showing us he had all the control. There wasn't a single thing we could do about it. If he wanted us to sit here all day, then we'd have to abide.

Sitting at the head of the table the king watched as we all bowed our heads in respect.

"Rise," he commanded.

Lifting my head, I glanced around. It was rare I was ever invited to sit in on these meetings. I recognized all the advisers almost immediately. Across from me was General Nolau, a prominent leader from the last war. His long black hair was pulled back into a slick bun.

Beside me, I recognized Koen Yu. He was in charge of my father's treasury. Accounting for all the taxes collected and money spent on war. It made sense that he'd be here to consult on what we would need to fund this offensive.

In the corner of the room, I spotted Cyrus. He was posted near the entrance to the throne room and at least I knew he wasn't with my betrothed.

He'd been getting closer to Koraine and I didn't appreciate the attempt at befriending her. The last thing I needed was him reporting my failures with my future wife to my father.

"We should hit them here," one of the men at the table said, pointing to a spot on the map. I'd been distracted long enough not to realize they'd already started the conversation. Trying to focus again, I began glancing over the map. "Are you mad?" another questioned. "Sending our men there would be slaughter. That's where the stronghold of their forces is kept. If we attack there, we'll lose a majority of our men."

The stronghold was located far south of the kingdoms capital, Morya.

The man was right. Walking into their kingdom at that point was sentencing our men to death. The more strategic route would be to attack one of their smaller bases.

"If we attack there and win, we will have a major advantage over the kingdom of air!"

The advisers continued to argue. Each of them pointing to different spots on the map where they believed we should attack. Koen stressed over the cost of weapons and ships in the background of their debates, all while my father sat back and listened. He never once voiced his opinion.

Meeting his gaze, I held it for a moment before he flicked a hand, sending flames racing across the table. They immediately consumed the parchment map, commanding everyone's attention. Each of the advisers stopped their arguing.

"We move on their stronghold. I am taking no chances. If we do not hit them there, they could easily still move on us. Is that what any of you want?" the king noted.

No one dared voice their opinion against him. I didn't agree with the choice. There was still a chance that Luheo wouldn't move against us if we attacked somewhere else with less risk. They could divert their forces to help rebuild after our offensive and abandon their planned attack. It didn't feel right forcing our men to sacrifice their lives for the riskier option.

"Bellamy?" the king drawled. "Do you have something to add? This is your command, after all."

I'd almost forgotten in the disorder that I was to be the one to lead this attack.

"I just don't think we should risk so many lives. There has to be another way," I started. "What if we hit them at one of their larger ports? Take out some of their trade ships and war ships. They'd be forced to halt any imminent attacks."

The king paused for a moment before standing. Walking around the table, he stood directly behind me. His large frame towering over me, and making me feel small. My heart was racing, waiting for his response. I could barely breathe, afraid to move even in the slightest.

"And do any of you agree?" the king dared the others.

No one answered. I knew immediately I'd said the wrong thing.

"You'll lead our forces to their stronghold. You'll launch your attack there, and since you care so deeply about their wellbeing and lives, you will make sure each one of them returns," the king instructed.

Fuck.

I should've never spoken. Keeping everyone alive was an impossible task, and he knew that. Judging by the wide eyes of everyone seated around me they knew it too.

"You'll begin preparations and training exercises with the men this week. I suggest you use as much time as you possibly can if you want to make sure they all live," the king drawled. "You are all dismissed," he finished, waving off the rest of the men.

Each of them hurried from the room. I stood, ready to move past my father. He grabbed my arm stopping me, his grip firm.

"Do not embarrass me. I don't want to have to punish you for failure," he warned.

I lowered my gaze as he let go of my arm. Hurrying, I left the throne room before he could say anything else. Or worse change his mind and punish me now for speaking out against him in front of his own advisers.

MM

My Plans to see Koraine after the meeting were ruined. I was in no mood to deal with her unpredictable antics and disobedience. Unfortunately for me, the goddesses had other plans.

Walking down the hall straight toward me was Koraine. And she wasn't alone, beside her my sister cheerfully rambled on about something. Koraine nodded along, but I was confident her mind was somewhere else.

"Bellamy!" Nyla exclaimed when she saw me. "Perfect timing!"

This was my chance. I could try to improve my situation with Koraine before anyone reported to the king that we were no better off than before.

"Nyla. Koraine," I nodded at them.

"We're heading out for a swim. It's been so hot and miserable today. Join us!" my sister exclaimed. The pair was dressed in similar swimwear

the only difference was that Koraine's was the royal blue of Morwen and Nyla's was a fiery red.

The last place I wanted to be was out by that pool of water, but was I really going to pass this up?

"Alright," I agreed. Koraine's eyes widened. She hadn't expected me to agree. Neither had my sister, judging by the look on her face.

Following them out of the palace and through the garden, I tried to think of something to say to Koraine. We hadn't spoken much since our dinner together, and that had ended disastrously.

Passing by the roses in the garden, I caught Koraine eyeing them. I made a rash decision, without thinking. Walking over to one of the bushes, I found a spot on a stem where the thorns were sparse. I broke the stem, and picked the rose off the bush.

"This is for you," I offered the flower to Koraine. A peace offering.

"Thanks," she said, giving me a warm smile. It was the first she'd seemed genuinely grateful for something I'd done.

"That flower is a lot like you," I continued, and she tilted her head, her eyebrows drawing together.

I watched as the turned the stem in her hand, the flower twirling slightly.

"It's thorns protect it from danger, keeping unwanted predators away," I started. "But beyond that layer of defense, there is a beauty to be found. I think there's more to you than just being the daughter of the famous General Neroe. I think you just haven't let anyone in that far yet."

Her eyes widened, but she didn't say a word. The chance she would let me in to see that side of her was slowly slipping further away each day. I wouldn't give up so easily. My people were relying on me.

The water looked refreshing as we approached the pool, and the two women immediately jumped in. The look of pure delight on Koraine's face was a sight to behold. I'd never seen her beaming the way she was. She was so full of life. Commanding the surrounding water she created little displays of floating bubbles and twirling vortexes in the water. Each of her displays made Nyla laugh with delight. The pair were becoming closer friends than I'd anticipated.

"Are you going to join us?" Nyla asked. She already knew the answer. I didn't go in the water. Never would I step foot in that pool, or any other body of water for that matter. It was against my entire nature. I'd always

despised swimming, and even traveling aboard ships was hard for me. I was dreading the journey to Luheo that was rapidly approaching.

Crossing my arms, I watched them splash around in the water unable to hide my disgust. How anyone could enjoy such activities was beyond me.

A small ember butterfly caught my attention as it gracefully floated by. Tiny embers trailing from its wings as it flew through the garden. They were magnificent little creatures to watch, somehow able to wield fire similar to how I could. The butterflies could smother their flames enough to land on plants and trees without burning them, but let their fire show as they flew through the air.

Suddenly, a splash of water hit my face, startling me. Instinctively, I lashed out, throwing my flames in the direction of the attack. Fire spread across the ground at the edge of the pool. Koraine leapt backward in the water, her eyes widening.

Nyla instantly put out the flames, controlling them.

"What is wrong with you?" my sister asked, horrified.

The harmless joke hit a nerve. Koraine hadn't meant for it to be an attack against me, throwing one of the bubbles she'd created my way, but still I could not settle my temper.

"Do not ever do that again," I growled in her direction.

I watched as she flinched at my words. Her cheeks turning red.

Stalking off, I left the pair to continue their swim. I didn't wait around to be scolded like a child by my sister. I knew she'd be livid with me for my reaction and I knew it was impetuous.

Heading back into the palace, I decided it was time that I stop stalling and finally make the preparations to leave for Luheo in the weeks coming. Stopping the first guard I came across, I ordered him to gather the men who would be making the journey with me.

PREPARATIONS with the soldiers were going better than I'd expected. We only had a few weeks before we'd leave for our strike on Luheo. I'd been putting in extra hours of training each day where I could afford to. Not only had it been necessary to prepare to lead an army of soldiers, but it was also the only way I could work off the emotions that plagued me.

Around me, men trained tirelessly. Honing their skills manipulating flames and sparring with each other. I watched for a moment as two of them finished a sparring session, ending with one man on his knees. I turned my focus to my own training. Target practice hitting them from further away than normal. We needed the element of surprise to hit those with air abilities and hit them before they even saw us or could manipulate the surrounding air.

Things with Koraine had made no improvements. The situation at the pool had only driven her further from me. She still avoided me and spent a lot of her free time with Cyrus, which fueled my temper. I'd overheard some of the guards discussing it during one of the training sessions. It bothered me the way they spent so much time together. She was to be my wife and after Luheo, I would make sure I put an end to their friendship.

I'd put all my focus into preparing each of the soldiers to survive this attack, that I'd been neglecting my duties as Koraine's future husband. Instead, she sought comfort in Cyrus.

"My prince," a familiar voice called out from the shadows of the side of the courtyard, drawing my attention away from the burning targets I was taking out my temper on.

"Ervin?" I questioned, surprised to see the cook away from his kitchen. "What are you doing here?"

"You'll be leaving soon then, I suppose?" he asked. Not an answer to my question.

"Yes, we move on Luheo early autumn," I answered. The old man was biting his tongue. I could tell he had something to say, but was holding back. "Just spit it out, Ervin. What is it you actually want to know?"

I was losing patience. Exhaustion from the day's training was wearing me thin, and I wanted to head back to my own chambers to get cleaned up.

"It's just the orphanage." The mention of the orphanage had my attention peaked once more. I hadn't been to visit since my argument with Alaric. Many mornings I'd wanted to go back, but something always stopped me. Maybe it was because deep down I was a coward. I knew Kane's death was my fault, and still there was nothing I could do over it. I couldn't change the past.

"What about it?" I said, trying to hide my concern.

"I've seen the preparations. I know you're leaving on some war offensive. I don't want them to suffer while you're gone," Ervin said.

"They don't wish to see me."

"Have you tried?"

He had a point. I hadn't been back once since the incident.

"I didn't think so. Just take this to them before you go please," he requested, handing me a heavy sack. Opening it, I found more food scraps than I had ever brought them in one trip. "It should last them while you're gone."

The hope in the old man's eyes softened my demeanor. I knew this meant a lot to him. Alaric and Mariam were special to him, and over the years he'd always helped me provide for them without any questions asked. I owed him this one small favor.

"Fine. I'll go first thing tomorrow," I promised.

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BELLAMY



difficult to drag myself out of my bed as the sun rose outside my window. Dread filled me, drowning me in the silk sheets I was on top of. I wasn't ready to face Mariam and Alaric again, but I'd made a promise and I would keep it. I owed Ervin that much.

Throwing off the sheets, I finally pulled myself out of the bed. I needed to hurry and get ready or I would miss my opportunity to slip out of the palace before everyone else started their day.

Finding a red long sleeve and simple black pants buried in my wardrobe, I readied myself to leave. The sack of food from Ervin sat in the corner of my room next to my fireplace, and I grabbed it before I left.

It was another beautiful day, the sun still low enough that the scorching summer heat was bearable. I still kept to the shade in the streets when I could. The sack I was carrying was heavy, and I didn't want to tire myself out before I even made it to the orphanage.

As I descended deeper into the city, a chill ran down my spine. I felt like I was being watched. Unseen eyes following me from apartment windows above. I couldn't shake the paranoid feeling, and glanced around hoping to put my mind at ease. I spotted a woman hanging a sheet out her window to dry, but nothing else out of the ordinary.

The entire way to the orphanage, I never shook the feeling I was being watched. Arriving at the door, I hesitated. What was I even going to say? If I left the sack at the door would they find it before other starving families took the food? I could never look Ervin in the eyes again if I did not follow through on my promise.

Before I could change my mind, I knocked on the door. The moments waiting outside were agony. Every passing second, my heart pounded in my chest. An uneasiness passed through me, and my head was dizzy from nerves.

This was a mistake.

I was about to leave when the wooden door slowly opened. Mariam's face appeared in the crack, hesitantly opening it.

"You shouldn't be here," she said, glancing around nervously. "Get inside."

I didn't question her, moving quickly behind the door and closing it. Her peculiar demeanor had my chest tightening, and the aching feeling told me something was wrong.

"Why are you here?" Mariam asked her voice hushed and unsteady.

"I brought this from Ervin," I said, placing the sack of food on the table. It was unlike Alaric not to have joined Mariam, and that ache in my chest sent a pit to my stomach.

"Because you're leaving for Luheo, right?" Mariam asked, rushed.

I nodded. How did she know that already? That information shouldn't have left the palace gates yet .

"They took him," Mariam said, tears welling in her eyes. I tilted my head, watching as she broke.

"They took Alaric," she said, rushing toward me and wrapping her arms around me. She heaved a few sobs into me, then backed away, wiping the tears. "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have done that," she whispered, eyes wide.

"Who took him?" I asked, but before she could answer children came running into the room.

I tried to wipe the concern from my face as I smiled down at them. Many of them hugged my legs or tugged at my shirt for my attention. Reaching over them, I began pulling fruit from the sack on the table. Passing them out to the children, I tried to distract them from Mariam who still appeared distraught. As they each grabbed a piece of fruit, they ran off, delighted with their new treats.

Once all of them were gone again, I turned back to Mariam. "Who took him?" I demanded, trying to guide her over to the wooden table.

"The guards," she said quietly, as she sat in one of the chairs. "They're rounding up the men from down here to serve in your offensive against Luheo." She placed her head in her hands, shaking it.

"That isn't possible, I've seen the soldiers who were selected for it, this must be a mistake."

"Mistake? You think I would mistake why they took my husband?" she asked, her voice growing hysterical.

"No, I just don't understand how this is possible. I've been overseeing everything, training the men for this invasion. I know they're trained guards from the royal guard. It doesn't make sense to send untrained men. Why would they take him? Maybe you misheard?"

"They said Luheo and they leave in the next few weeks," she answered. "Another family told me they are keeping the men at a nearby base just outside the city."

It didn't make any sense. These men were untrained, even if they started learning now, they'd be killed within moments of starting the battle. Why would they be sent to Luheo?

That's when it hit me.

My father had decided on his lesson. That day in the war meeting, I'd thought I'd escaped his firm hand, but that was far from the truth. The king was patient, biding his time to teach me obedience. He had no intentions of wasting his men's lives on the offensive. He wasn't going to send the guards. He was going to replace them with these other men.

My stomach sunk, realizing I'd been set up for failure. I couldn't guarantee these men would make it back. Fiery rage built in my chest.

"I'll fix this," I promised Mariam, squeezing her hand. I wasn't going to let Alaric die. Especially not for my father's twisted games.

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KORAINE



isiting Talay was becoming more routine. No one questioned me when I left the palace earlier hours in the morning. Those within the city didn't recognize me and no one treated me like an outsider or an enemy in the streets of Raden. If they noticed my untraditional clothing, they didn't say anything.

Over the month I'd been in Abelon, I'd started to become more familiar with the city's layout.

The brutal heat of summer was finally fading away with each day, and the fall solstice approaching. The kingdom had made it through the worst of summer. I couldn't wait until the cool of autumn chased away the rest of the heat, the promise of winter right around the corner after. I'd finally be surrounded by water come snowfall and that alone was enough to put me in good spirits.

"Hey there!" one of the friendly fishermen from the docks shouted as he saw me approaching.

I walked along the cobblestone path next to the water. The waves trickled out as they reached this point and by the time they splashed against the docks, they were no more than sea foam rolling in. I made my way to the furthest dock, walking down it.

I was starting to recognize a few of the citizens that frequented the docks. I never dared to talk to any of them, fearing they'd shun me if they learned my identity. It was possible some of them already knew from the first time I'd visited Talay.

I used a wooden row boat to travel out into the water where there were less prying eyes before I called to him this time. The boat belonged to the palace, and I'd begun borrowing it after Nyla had pointed it out to me. A part of me noted that it could be used for an escape if needed.

The distant idea of escape was drifting further and further everyday. The more time I spent at the palace, the more comfortable I was becoming with the idea that this was now my life. As much as I wished to see Morwen again, I knew my sacrifice would save children and families. I couldn't help but think of the little girl I'd met my last day there.

Hopping into the boat, I began loosening the ropes tethering it in place. I used the little oars to row myself away from the docks until I knew no one was watching me, and only then did I use my influence over the water to propel the boat into the middle of the sea.

Once I was out far enough, I called out to Talay. He could always hear me over the crash of waves with his exceptional hearing.

After a few minutes of waiting, I saw the ripple of water, and flashes of light blue scales that told me Talay was approaching. His large head poked out of the water beside my boat. Moving to the edge, I reached out to stroke his scales. They were smooth, the way a rock tumbling through the sea would be. I plucked a piece of seaweed from one of the two dark blue horns that sprung from his head.

Reaching for the other, I stroked the base of it, and Talay nuzzled into me. Laughing, I did it again. I knew the sea serpent had a soft spot for anyone who paid that area attention. It'd been my secret for years as to how I'd gotten the sea serpent to listen to me so fast.

Taming and training sea serpents to ride was no easy feat.

I'd watch many grown men and warriors struggle to stay on the back of their sea serpents, thrown off for the littlest things. They were temperamental beasts. Like the waves, they couldn't be controlled. One needed to learn how to follow their lead.

I dropped an anchor from the boat, securing it in place in the sea. We were still close enough to shore to anchor, but far enough from prying eyes. Leaving my boat, I abandoned the rickety vessel for the back of Talay. It was a beautiful day, and no way would I waste it inside.

The sea splashed at my skin, and I welcomed the drops of water that clung to me. Out here I could smell the salty air and feel both the warmth of the sun with the cool water beneath me. If I closed my eyes, it felt like home. Keeping my eyes shut, I held out my hands to the side. Letting

everything hit me as Talay sped across the waves. A sound of excitement escaped my lips, and for a moment, I was enraptured.

I was able to forget the worries of my people, and forget the marriage I would soon go through with.

Out here I could just be myself, without a care in the world.

I was also ignorant.

The longer I stayed out in the sea, the more time I wasted trying to find a way out of marriage that did not condemn my people. Talay could carry me away to a far-off island or new kingdom, but I'd be a fugitive. One with not only one kingdom hunting them, but two kingdoms hunting them. I didn't want to be an enemy of both Morwen and Abelon. I'd be foolish to think I'd make it out of that alive.

Guilt ate at me for even considering the idea and I directed Talay back toward my boat. I needed to get back before it grew too late in the day. Already the morning was coming to an end and soon Nyla would seek me out for lunch.

I was more than happy to indulge her wishes. They were of no harm to me, and the princess was always willing to answer any and all of my questions I had about Abelon. She'd been the one to reveal to me that their lands were desolate, and I'd tucked away that knowledge in case war ever did come to Morwen again.

Returning to my boat, I gave Talay one last stroke before heading back to the docks. Returning, I noticed all the fishermen had left for their day of work. I sympathized with them, knowing their labor wasn't very fruitful.

In Morwen the fishermen brought home giant hauls of fish at the end of the day, and all different varieties of them. Any seafood your heart desired you could find in one of the markets. An ache struck my heart thinking about it. When I became queen consort I'd share what I knew with one of these fishermen.

Walking back toward the palace, I decided to take my time weaving through the streets of Raden, enjoying the mild summer day.

I swore my eyes were deceiving me.

I'd been wandering the streets back when I noticed a man ahead of me. Carrying a sack, he crossed right before my eyes down a side street. As I watched, I almost immediately recognized him.

Bellamy.

From the whispers I'd heard in the streets, the prince wasn't well liked by those living in the lower portions of the city. Something terrible had occurred recently and one thing was clear. He wasn't welcomed here.

I should've just went straight back to the palace. He would kill me if he knew I was following him, but my curiosity wouldn't let me. Why would Bellamy be this far into the city?

Nyla had never mentioned her brother coming down to the city. Even she didn't venture this far in, knowing the general sentiment toward the royal family wasn't favorable.

I followed behind the prince, keeping enough distance that he wouldn't notice me. I tried to blend with the morning crowd of citizens making their way through the streets. I paused in the doorway of a bakery as the prince glanced around.

The smell of freshly baked muffins wafted to my nose, and I almost considered diverting my journey in trade for a delicious pastry. As the prince moved on, I decided to continue following.

The sack he carried slowed him down, and I had to shuffle to ensure I didn't get too close. I almost tripped on the uneven stones beneath my feet as my sandal caught on a raised one.

After a few more turns and the painfully slow journey, the prince finally paused outside of a door.

I remained hidden behind a corner, watching. Standing outside for minutes, he finally pounded on the wooden door. An older woman opened it letting him inside, unaware that I watched from the shadows.

I hurried over to the home I'd seen him enter. It was modest and quaint. The wooden door had many chips to its surface and there was a single window beside it. Lucky for me, it was wide open.

Pressing my back to the cool stone wall, I tried to listen through the open window. Poking my head slightly forward, I was able to see through the blowing curtains to inside. The older woman talking to the prince appeared to be crying and hugging him.

I couldn't make out any of the words they were saying. Something about it felt wrong to be spying on him. Bellamy was nothing but

loathsome, but still guilt ate at me. The moment felt private, intimate even.

It wasn't my business to pry into and it certainly wasn't going to save me from this marriage. Instead, it only made me feel like I was the deplorable one. What type of person followed someone without their permission and spied on their personal moments? I'd be furious if Bellamy did the same to me. What was this kingdom shaping me into?

As I was about to leave, movement through a doorway caught my eye. Multiple children came running into the room, all of them tugging at Bellamy and trying to push their way to see him. Bellamy began handing out pieces of fruit from the sack he'd set down. Each child excitedly took the vibrantly colored fruits and joyfully ran off.

That's when realization took over.

Something in my heart squeezed, knowing the compassion that the prince had for these orphans. The monster I'd painted him to be was not the man standing before me. I couldn't watch anymore and I took off bunching my skirt into my hands to lift it.

I was running through the streets to the palace. Putting as much distance between the prince and myself as I could. I needed space to clear my head. Why did I feel so torn inside?

Everything in me told me to despise Bellamy. To view him as my enemy, but now every time I tried to picture that I saw the smiles on the faces of those children when they saw the prince.

I blocked the image from my mind, trying to clear it of anything related to the prince. Before long, I was back at the palace gates. I mumbled my greetings to the guards as they manipulated the flames to allow me to pass. My mind was a complete mess. There was only one place on these grounds that I'd be able to clear my head.

Passing by the front entrance, I followed a path to the side of the palace. It led me straight back into the gardens. Heading for the furthest corner, I found myself mindlessly wandering into the pool of water tucked there. I threw myself into it, allowing myself to sink to the bottom.

I was still fully clothed, but I didn't care.

Forming a bubble around myself, I sat at the bottom of the pool for what felt like ages. Under the water, I was able to block out the world. Sound didn't reach me down here, and I knew it was the one place Bellamy wouldn't come searching for me once he was back.

I needed space to refocus my mind and remind myself why I was here. I was forced into this, my choices ripped away from me because of this family. And for what? To produce heirs and exact revenge on my father? To save Morwen from war?

Even as I asked myself the questions, I knew that wasn't why I'd stayed. I was finding the longer I stayed in Abelon, the fewer reasons I had to hate the kingdom.

I let out a frustrated growl, holding my head in my hands. Everything about this place was becoming a headache. One that was slowly driving me to question who I was anymore.

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KORAINE



couldn't stop thinking about the sight of the prince bringing the orphans spare food. It was nothing like the picture I'd built of Bellamy in my head. I needed him to be a ruthless and cruel prince, or everything I knew would come crashing down on me. Instead, he was doing his best to look after those who couldn't look after themselves. It was the same reason I was in Abelon to begin with. To protect the citizens of Morwen who couldn't protect themselves.

I didn't have time to process the way that made me feel. .

Nyla had invited me to her chambers to prepare for the fall solstice celebration. After weeks of nothing eventful, the palace was hosting a bonfire. From the chatter I'd heard, it was expected to be a sight to behold.

I was wandering down one of the long hallways that led to her chambers, when I rounded a corner and found myself face to face with the prince.

I immediately dropped my eyes to the tiled floor, refusing to meet his gaze. My head was still swimming with thoughts, and his presence flustered me.

"Are you heading to Nyla's?" he asked in a matter of fact tone.

"I'll be getting ready for tonight's festivities in her chambers," I murmured, unable to steady my tone.

The prince moved to walk around me, his large frame brushing against me as he slipped by. I risked a glance up, finding his dark eyes set on me.

"I'm sorry for the pool," he said, taking me by surprise. I opened my mouth to respond but was speechless. "I shouldn't have let my temper get out of hand like that, you didn't deserve it."

His apology weighed on me. I hadn't expected him to care how his outburst had made me feel.

"I'm sorry for the dress," I blurted, before I could stop myself. My cheeks turned a rosy pink.

The prince nodded, understanding the concession I'd made to admit the wrongdoing.

"Perhaps we may make it to this wedding after all," the prince said, smirking as he walked off. My eyes were glued to him until he disappeared around a corner.

I didn't have time to debate the meaning behind his words. I was already late for meeting Nyla.

"EVERYONE WHO CAN WIELD fire will contribute to the large bonfire. It will burn through the night, and celebrations will last until dawn!" Nyla exclaimed. "We host this every year to celebrate the start of fall and it's always chaos."

She didn't elaborate on what she meant by that. Part of me was nervous, to be around so many fire wielders and flames for the night was my worst nightmare. At least by the sound of Nyla's rambling, the festivities would include lots of alcohol. If anything, a little wine would calm my anxieties and help me relax.

Summer in Abelon was approaching an end, and the king still hadn't announced when the wedding would occur. What was he waiting for?

"Stop scowling, you're going to ruin your makeup!" Nyla scolded me, her arms crossed.

She'd convinced me to let her put light makeup on my face, painting my eyelids with silver sparkles. The entire time she'd gone on about some of the beautiful women of Abelon who'd be attending tonight, and which ones she hoped would end up back in her chambers.

Since she wasn't the heir to the throne, there was no pressure on her to marry the correct person. From what I could tell, her father paid her little attention, if any at all. She had all the freedom to make whatever decisions she pleased.

I wiggled in the velvet seat I was in at her vanity. She was adding a pink tint to my lips. I was turned away from her mirror, unable to see what the makeup looked like. Instead I found myself staring at her large, golden bed. The white sheets looked inviting, and I wanted to curl up and take a nap instead of facing the exhausting nobles at the bonfire.

"Will Cyrus be at this celebration?" I asked. I hadn't seen the captain of the guard in a few days, and part of me wondered when I'd see him again.

"Probably," Nyla shrugged. "He is the captain of the guard, I'd imagine my father would have him there."

My shoulders relaxed, and I hoped I'd have at least a moment to see him. I'd grown fond of his company over the weeks.

"Now hurry and get changed," Nyla said, tossing me my dress. I stole a glance at myself in the mirror, admiring the work Nyla had done. For once my insecurities stayed buried deep down, as I smiled at my reflection.

I'd picked out a silver dress for the occasion. It was lightweight enough that the fire's warmth wouldn't bother me. The dress was short, falling above my knees and the deep plunging neckline showed off my chest. Nyla had insisted I wear a blue gem pendent with it all.

Once I was dressed, I helped Nyla tie her own little red dress in the back. It complimented her fiery red hair and tan skin perfectly. Glancing in the mirror, she grinned.

"We are quite the pair," she marveled.

"I suppose we are," I giggled. We were fire and ice beside each other.

As much as I hated these events, I had to admit the dress I wore, along with my pale hair made me look like a moon goddess. It was rare that I felt confident in my own skin, but tonight I had the power.

"We should probably go soon or we'll be late," Nyla noted.

"Would that be so horrible?" I murmured, but the princess didn't hear me.

The celebration was taking place in another portion of the palace grounds. A spacious outdoor courtyard, made of mainly stone. It was a wide open space, surrounded by columns and entryways leading off to other segments of the palace. Above, the moon illuminated the space.

My betrothed had not yet arrived. As I searched the space, I recognized a few of the faces of nobles I'd been introduced to at the welcome feast. I vaguely recalled some of their names from Bellamy introducing me.

"I see Mizuki," Nyla said excitedly from beside me. It was one of the women she had gone on forever about while we were getting ready.

"You should go talk to her," I encouraged. I didn't really want Nyla to leave me alone, but I knew she wanted to flirt with Mizuki.

"Really?" she questioned, raising one eyebrow at me.

"Go, before another woman snags her attention," I teased, pushing her onward. Nyla didn't hesitate, taking my advice she hurried off.

A group of guards walked out of one of the entries, escorting the king with them. All attention was pulled in his direction. I knew from what Nyla had said that the king would begin the celebration by lighting the first flame of the fire.

In the center of the courtyard, there was a large pile of wood set up for the bonfire. Approaching, the guards parted, letting the king stroll right up to it.

"Welcome," he bellowed. "Tonight is a night of celebration. A night to remember what makes us so strong as a kingdom, our unbreakable flames and to welcome the start of fall," he shouted.

Holding out a hand, he grew a flame in his palm. The fire danced wildly as he continued on.

"To Mavalu, we send thanks. May our flames continue to burn everlasting," he exclaimed the words I'd heard once before.

"May our flames continue to burn everlasting," the nobles repeated.

Throwing the flame into the wooden pile, it exploded, nurturing the start of the bonfire. One by one the nobles joined in using their ability to help the fire grow. This continued until the flame towered above us all, reaching for the sky.

The immense heat of it slammed into my face. If I wasn't careful, standing too close, I'd get singed.

I'd grown distracted watching each of the nobles adding to the bonfire, I hadn't noticed the person approaching me until they placed a firm hand on my shoulder. Jumping, my heart rate sped up.

"Don't let that smile falter," the king said in a low, stern tone. "You wouldn't want someone to think you're unhappy here."

I heard the threat. Shifting my weight away from the king, I desperately searched for any excuse to get away.

"Enjoy the night, daughter of Neroe," he said, squeezing my shoulder before he strode away.

A chill ran down my spine. As my nerves settled, a pit formed in my stomach. Spotting a table with drinks I decided to grab one in attempt to curb the growing nausea.

Wandering to the edge of the courtyard, I found glasses filled with all different fruit juices. Choosing a vibrant red liquid, I took a sip. It was tangy, with a hint of sweetness. My best guess was the juice came from pomegranates, a fruit not found often in Morwen. I'd only tried it a handful of times.

The juice was slightly warmed by the nearby fire. I was sweating and needed to cool down. I spotted a small pitcher of water nearby. Manipulating a small stream of water from it, I let it hover before me. Splitting the water into four small orbs, I turned them to ice. They fell into my glass and taking another sip I found the drink to be more refreshing.

"Nice trick," a voice next to me said, startling me and causing me to almost spill my drink on myself. I wiped a few drops from my hand.

Turning, I found Cyrus watching me. His eyes looked amused, and a small grin spread across his face.

"Sorry, I couldn't help myself. I didn't mean to startle you. I didn't realize you could do that."

"What? Turn water to ice?" I asked. He nodded. "It's pretty simple, actually. A lot of water manipulators are able to do so."

I knew very few water manipulators who couldn't control ice. After all, it was just solidified water. Everyone who could control water had the ability to control ice with a bit of practice. I'd learned to do so at a young age. I remember one particularly hard winter, my father had taught me how to melt away some of the ice that clung to our house.

My stomach twisted thinking about the joyful memory with my father. It was the first I'd allowed myself to think about him since being here.

"I think it's pretty impressive," Cyrus said with another step toward me. His brown eyes stared down at me.

"Where's your prince?" he asked, glancing around.

I honestly didn't have an answer. I still hadn't found the prince since I'd arrived. If I didn't soon, people other than Cyrus may also start to notice. With the king hovering nearby, I didn't want to tempt him revoking my freedom because I wasn't playing my role.

"I'm sure he's around here," I said, smiling sweetly.

"Mhm," he murmured, nodding his agreement. I knew he didn't believe me.

"I should really go find him," I said, backing a step away. I needed the king to believe I was trying.

Grabbing my hand, Cyrus placed a gently kiss to the back of it. I didn't have time to react, and hoped no one else had witnessed it.

"Well, you look stunning tonight," he said.

"Thank you," I said as my cheeks turned a shade of pink.

"I should get back to my post." Cyrus hurried off without another word.

My thoughts were all over the place when a small commotion drew my attention back to the bonfire. A few nobles were cheering wildly as they clashed glasses together in rejoice and watched another person add to the fire. With a few steps, I spotted why they were so excited.

Bellamy had arrived, and he was putting on quite the show.

THE PRINCE WAS JUGGLING balls of fire and entertaining some of the noble families. In a big showing, he tossed the three separate flames into the bonfire. Raising their glasses, they cheered for him. Many of the attendees were already drunk, proving Nyla's point that the fall solstice was just one large excuse for a celebration correct.

Watching, I couldn't help but notice the way the prince made sure to greet every single one of the surrounding nobles. His charismatic smile on full display. He was wearing a plain white, long sleeve shirt with his loose black pants.

I found myself staring at him for far too long. Again, my mind wandered back to the day before, seeing him in the streets of Raden. What had changed? He was still the prince and still my enemy, but in the hall today had I sensed more?

I stole another glance at the prince, this time his eyes connecting with mine.

I needed a distraction. Wandering to another table, I found an unopened bottle of wine. I opened it and took a sip, claiming the bottle for myself. I needed to clear my mind before I made a terrible decision tonight.

The only way to do that was to forget for the night. I carried the bottle of wine I'd picked up off the table, drinking straight from it.

"Careful, that stuff can be potent," a low voice behind me warned. Turning, I found Bellamy's eyes on me. His gaze searing my skin. Suddenly I felt exposed in my tiny, silver dress.

"Mostly water, remember?" I said, waving the bottle at him. Already I knew that wasn't the case here. This wine tasted different, stronger. My face warmed as I took another sip. "Where have you been all night?" I asked, selfishly wishing he'd found me sooner.

It would've kept the king away, but I also knew deep down a part of me liked the way his hungry stare raked over me as we talked.

Shaking my head a little, I blamed the wine for such absurd thoughts.

"I was keeping our guests entertained," he said, motioning to the group he had just left.

"I noticed," I said, rolling my eyes.

I tried to convince myself I only cared because of the king's warning, self-preservation. I needed to play along to survive here.

"I'm flattered," the prince said, raising his eyebrows. It was hard to tear my eyes from him.

I opened my mouth to retort, but he stopped me.

Stepping closer, he took the bottle of wine from my hands and took a sip. Glancing down, a devilish smile graced his lips. He lifted his thumb, wiping the corner of my mouth. My entire face grew hot, and I knew my cheeks were turning a shade of red.

"You had a little of this there," he said, handing back the bottle. What had gotten in to him?

Fuck.

I was completely failing at forgetting.

"Enjoy the night," he whispered close to my ear. "It's supposed to be a celebration, don't take it so seriously."

I must be drunk if Bellamy was telling me to relax. He walked off without a single glance back.

Deciding to take Bellamy's advice, I wandered off to find Nyla. If I enjoyed myself, I'd blend in with the attendees and wasn't that exactly what the king wanted? For the kingdom to consider me one of their own and accept peace with Morwen. It served his goals perfectly.

I wanted to share a drink with the princess and paced around the courtyard until I spotted her. I found her sitting on a bench alone, scowling down into a golden chalice.

"It's a party, why are you over here alone?" I teased.

"She turned me down," the princess murmured, guilt wiping my smile.

I sat beside her on the bench. Handing the bottle of wine her way, I offered her a sip. "Want something a bit stronger?" I asked.

She took it without question, sipping down a large gulp.

"Careful, I hear that stuff is potent," I chuckled nervously.

"Well, in that case," she said, taking another large sip before handing it back.

"That bad?" I asked. She nodded. "Well, then she's missing out, because any woman in this kingdom, in all the four kingdoms for that matter, would be lucky to have you," I said. That seemed to bring a smile to her face.

We spent the next hours talking and watching the festivities unfold. There were fire entertainers who arrived, putting on all different displays around the courtyard. Throughout the night, palace workers swapped out different trays of food and chalices of drinks on the tables. I tried a few of the delicious desserts they brought out.

Coughing, I practically choked on a chocolate I'd tossed into my mouth. My tongue was on fire. Nyla laughed, trying to get words out in between.

"Careful," she managed. "Those are spicy chocolates!"

"You couldn't have mentioned that sooner," I said as my eyes watered. She shrugged.

After finishing the bottle of wine, I grabbed another. Nyla and I had quickly finished the first bottle together, but it still wasn't enough to wipe away all the thoughts of Bellamy. With every sip, I felt his thumb brushing my lip delicately again.

Nyla provided me with all the gossip and secrets of the noble families. She pointed out which ones were here only to impress the king and which ones had come for the expensive wine. I was genuinely having fun.

I thanked the goddesses for that.

I just wanted to be myself, and tonight I could finally be that. No one was trying to win my favor or talk to me just to get at Bellamy.

I found myself searching the crowd again for the prince. He was deep in conversation with the man I recognized as Ronan and a woman with long dark hair beside him.

"Mae Saulenere," Nyla said following my stare. "One of the richest woman in Abelon, but also the most pretentious," she scoffed, narrowing her eyes. I felt like there was a story there, but I didn't pry.

"You know, I really thought I wouldn't like you. I couldn't imagine being friends with a Morwenian. I wanted to dislike you before you arrived," Nyla slurred, the wine taking its hold on her.

"Oh really? Well, I certainly didn't ever imagine myself sharing wine with an Abelonian," I laughed, throwing my head back as I did.

"Here's to unlikely friends," Nyla held up the wine bottle and took a sip, passing it off to me.

"I'll drink to that," I said with a grin.

"Do you ever wish you could just run away? Escape from all of this insanity," Nyla said, her brows furrowing and a frown starting to form.

"What do you mean?"

"I want to see the world, without having to fear for my life. Being princess of a kingdom everyone hates doesn't grant you that ability." Her voice trailed off.

"Where would you go?" I asked, understanding the need to escape, to see the world and everything it had to offer.

"Zetron," she said firmly.

"The earth kingdom? Why there?"

"As great as you make Morwen sound, I've always wanted to see the vast fields of Zetron. I've heard stories of mountains the length of multiple cities and wide of fields of grass and flowers, gifted by Aeris, for as far as you can see. Even their capital, Gralar, is filled with greenery," she explained. "I could never have that here. Our land will never be that."

A part of me sympathized for the Abelonians. Their lands were mostly uninhabitable. I was starting to understand their constant urge to fight for power and resources, but I wished there was a better way to help. The thought started to dampen my mood, and I chased it away with another sip of wine.

Nyla decided to cheer herself up by pursuing another woman who she'd spotted near the fire. I didn't mind that she'd left me again. I understood. Part of me wished I had that. Someone to flirt with and spend the night with.

Before I could stop myself, I was searching the crowd of people for Bellamy again. Shaking my head, I decided I needed to walk. Distract my mind again from being drawn to him.

Taking another sip of wine, I stood ready to wander. My balance swayed a little, and I paused to steady myself. I must've been worn out if my legs were wobbly. My head was pounding, but I brushed it off as exhaustion.

Suddenly, I regretted the last sip of wine. My vision was growing blurry the further I walked, and I couldn't form a single thought. Stumbling, I tried to find my way to one of the stone columns, but instead found myself face to face with the large flames of the fire.

My heart raced and I could feel it pounding in my chest. One misstep and I could end up burned by the flames reaching out to me. I tried to take a careful step back, but stumbled a little. Holding my arms out, I tried to regain my balance.

I wanted to call on my water and put out the entire fire, but something told me the king would take that as a sign of defiance. My head pounded as I stumbled forward another step, the intensity of the heat bringing pain to my skin.

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BELLAMY



ord had spread fast about the offensive being launched against Luheo. I caught whispers amongst many of the nobles in attendance. Some of them were displeased with the king's decision, not wanting to bring war back to our kingdom. Others whispered their hopes for the annihilation of Luheo once and for all. It was impossible to please them all. Yet, that was my duty. Keep each and everyone one of them pleased.

I spent my night bouncing between groups of nobles and powerful families. Reassuring the worried ones that this operation would be seamless and that I would be overseeing the entire thing myself.

"There's no reason to believe Luheo would be able strike Abelon." I found myself saying repeatedly.

It was a lie.

I played into the delight of others when they asked about the operation. Boasting that this would be the offensive that finally stopped Luheo from targeting Abelon. I had no way of truly knowing what the result would be, but the chalice of alcohol in my hand gave me the confidence to continue my charade with each noble I spoke to.

Soon their whispers faded, and I began to relax a little. I knew my father would want me to continue playing politics, but I just wanted to enjoy the festivities. I'd already found Koraine earlier in the night, deep in a bottle of some of Abelon's strongest wine. She was going to regret that decision come morning, but there was no world in which she would take my advice.

I tried to keep an eye on her between appeasing the other guests.

Watching her with my sister as they giggled on a bench, I wished I could join. This was supposed to be a night of celebration and festivity and instead I found myself with a massive headache entertaining the guests.

I made my way to a table holding small chocolate and plucked one up with little red pieces in it. The heat of it's spice hit my tongue and I let a sound of delight escape from my lips.

My gaze was once again stolen by Koraine when she rose to grab another bottle of wine. The way her silver dress caught the light of the flame was mesmerizing. It framed her perfectly. No matter how much I wanted to look away, I couldn't tear my eyes from her. She looked divine.

Even in my distaste for marrying a Morwenian, I couldn't deny that one irrefutable fact. In a world of stars, Koraine was the moon.

"I suppose you'll be leaving soon then, friend," a voice from behind said, grabbing my shoulder and stealing my attention.

Rolling my eyes, I found Ronan drunkenly holding himself up. Using me as his post. Pushing his hand off of me, I stepped away, letting him stumble a few steps. His date watched wearily a few steps away.

"What's it to you?" I asked, annoyed. It was men like Ronan who made these events intolerable.

"If you need any favors while you're gone, I'm your man," he slurred. "Perhaps someone to keep your wife company while she waits for your return." His vile grin made my insides boil, and his date narrowed her eyes at him.

Grabbing the collar of his shirt, I pulled him close. "I suggest you do not ever let me hear mention of my wife on your tongue again, or you just might find yourself without one," I snarled. Throwing him back, he scrambled off.

I doubted he'd remember much of the interaction come morning, but I wouldn't let him disrespect Koraine like that. I didn't care about my own conflicting feelings for her. No one would speak ill of my wife and leave without a single mark to remind them never to do so again.

Returning to the group of nobles I'd been entertaining earlier in the night, I found them whispering about something new. At first, I didn't mind them much attention. The elites of the city couldn't help themselves with their gossip. There was always news to spread about the happenings in Abelon. I tried not to concern myself with such petty information. My sister

was more well versed in keeping up with the important news. If I ever needed information on someone, she'd have it for me.

It wasn't until I caught the mention of Koraine that I cocked my head to listen. How had my future wife become the topic of their babbling?

"Poor girl. Doesn't know how to handle her alcohol," one of the noble woman whispered sympathetically.

"She's going to fall in that fire. Mark my words," another man chimed in.

Following their line of sight, I spotted what they were all watching. Koraine was stumbling close to the towering flames, and my heart raced as I watched her skim the edges of them. Was she trying to get herself killed?

I needed to do something and fast, before she got harmed, and before she gave these nobles more to chatter about. Stalking over to the fire, I carefully approached.

Moving toward her, I grabbed her waist from behind, pulling her back into me. I held her there for a moment, knowing she was safe with me. I let go, realizing how close I was holding her. Instinct had just taken over. Her bright blue eyes found me as she turned to see who'd touched her.

"Bellamy?" she questioned, half surprised and half relieved. I was glad to know she wasn't angry with me for pulling her back from the fire.

I could tell by the confusion on her face that she was well past her limit for drinking, and needed sleep, and fast. The night was still early and many of the guests would stay, feeding the fire, and sharing drinks until dawn. However, I didn't see the harm in leaving early.

I was sick of entertaining the guests, and if I had to listen to one more opinion on our offensive against Luheo, I would lose my temper.

"Let's get you inside," I whispered into her ear, careful not to allow others to hear us. The urge to protect her washed over me. I wouldn't let the flames touch her.

I kept telling myself it was because she was to be queen. There was a certain appearance we had to uphold, a standard to live up to, but Koraine was different. Already she was more than that standard. She didn't care what others thought about her, and I think a bit of me admired that. The way she continued to be herself even as Abelon chipped away at her, trying to break her spirits.

I wrapped a protective arm around her shoulder, shielding her from the fire. Holding her close to my body, I made sure she had steady ground before guiding her.

Ushering her away from the fire and through one of the pillared entries, I led her through the endless palace halls. We were getting closer to my chambers when she paused. Stopping, she stared at me blankly.

"I can't," she said, her words barely audible. "I can't keep walking." She grabbed her head, closing her eyes. I prayed she wouldn't be sick in the middle of the palace. Glancing around, I had no other choice.

I held my breath as I walked over to her. She was barely keeping her balance and I caught her before she fell over.

Lifting her into my arms, I carried her. She leaned her head against my chest, her eyes remaining shut. I could feel her heart racing as she nestled into me. This was the most vulnerable I'd ever seen Koraine be. Part of me felt guilty, like I shouldn't be seeing this, but I also knew she wouldn't have wanted to be left with those nobles like this.

And I didn't want Cyrus stepping in this time.

Citrus filled my nose as my chin grazed against her smooth white hair. She was easy to carry, and I had no trouble making it to my chambers.

Finally arriving to my chambers, I pushed the door open. Placing Koraine down on my bed, I tried to decide what to do with her. Could she be left alone in her own room? I supposed I could listen for her all night, but I worried if she tried to wander I'd be too late realizing it. I needed her to remain where I could watch her.

Koraine was staying in my bed.

SHE DIDN'T ARGUE when I helped her get comfortable in my bed. Accepting her fate, she pulled up the silk sheets and settled into them. I'd made sure she had plenty of pillows behind her head, in case she was sick during the night. The only thing left was her clothing.

The little silver dress clinging to her skin didn't look comfortable, but I couldn't remove it. That was a guaranteed way to make my future wife detest me forever. After debating it, I left her in the clothing from the bonfire. She'd be happier for it in the morning.

I sat on the opposite side of the bed, watching her as she discovered every detail of the new bed she was in. Running her hands along the smooth silk and fluffing out the fancy pillows behind her, I'd almost forgotten the room she was staying in was nothing compared to mine. A twinge of guilt hit me for giving her such a lackluster space. Finally, her gaze found mine.

"You know, if you weren't so despicable, you might actually be attractive," she slurred. Reaching out, she touched a gentle hand to my cheek. I flinched away from it.

"Don't," I warned her, but she continued.

"You're so warm," she said, her hand against my skin. "Why did I think you would be cold?"

Her words made no sense. It was the ramblings of a drunk. And somehow still, I understood what she meant. To her I was less than human. I was the enemy. It would be easier for her to picture me as anything but human.

I let my hand wander to her cheek, holding it in my palm. I stroked her face with my thumb, lightly.

"Touching you is a terrible idea," I whispered, unable to pull my hand away. The way her deep blue eyes stared into mine had me stuck in her grasp.

Kissing her like this would be a grievous decision. She was drunk, and she didn't really want me. Letting her kiss me is what my father would want. To trap her into this marriage. Force her to fall for me. As much as I wished to be the heir he wanted, there were some lines I was still unwilling to cross.

If I was going to get Koraine to help this kingdom, I'd do it on my own terms and when she wasn't drunk. I finally pulled my hand away, dropping my gaze to the bed. She fell back, clumsily. Already her eyes closing.

Standing, I made my way to the side of the bed she was lying on. I removed her shoes, slowly pulling back the sheets careful not to wake her. Already she was in a peaceful sleep.

She was a beautiful creature. If she hadn't been from Morwen, I would've considered myself lucky to marry her.

Pulling the sheets up, I made sure she was comfortable before setting up my own arrangements. There was a velvet sofa in the corner of the room. It would suffice for the night. Sleeping in the bed with Koraine didn't feel right, and moving her to her own room now risked waking her.

Finding a spare blanket in one of the chests in my room, I turned the sofa into a bed for the night. I'd taken one of the pillows from my own bed

to use and propped it at one end of the sofa. I positioned myself to be able to watch Koraine.

She was asleep, but part of me was still worried. Laying on my side, I watched as her chest rose and fell in a rhythmic pattern. It was comforting knowing she was alright. She was safe here.

After a few moments, she stirred. Blinking her eyes open, she found me watching her. I didn't dare look away. I didn't care that she knew I was watching. Suddenly, her face turned somber.

"Why don't you want me?" she whispered through the dark room.

The question stung more than it should have . My heart felt like it was tearing as her words registered. I had no words to comfort her. It was a fair question. I'd done nothing but make my displeasure with this wedding clear. And still, I hated that she felt that way. I wanted her to feel she belonged in Abelon. If she was going to be queen someday, this needed to be her home. If she was going to help Abelon survive and stay in power, then she needed to know it wanted her just as much. It was what would keep my people safe and prosperous.

And still I couldn't find the words to tell her this.

Instead, I remained silent. Observing as her eyes blinked shut once more. The moon light outside my window shone down on her as she slept, illuminating her white hair and making her look so peaceful.

I hoped she'd forget this come morning.

Soon I'd have to leave her for days, when I finally went to Luheo. Who would protect Koraine then? Something told me she'd be fine without me. She was strong and had survived this long in Abelon, she could survive anything. I only hoped she could avoid my father's grasp while I was gone.

Fury rose in my chest as my thoughts betrayed me. What if it was Cyrus that protected her while I was gone? The bastard would do anything to undermine me and make me look worthless to my father. I wouldn't put it past him to try to corrupt Koraine's thoughts while I was gone, if he hadn't already.

I wouldn't let him near my future wife.

Suddenly, I smelt smoke. Sitting up, I noticed a small flame on the edge of the sofa. It was singeing the material. I quickly controlled it, putting out the flame. I'd let my anger control me. Laying back down, I tried to close my eyes but kept finding myself checking that Koraine was alright.

It was going to be a long night.

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KORAINE



he bright morning sun called to me as I finally flickered my eyes open. I had slept soundly through the night, and vaguely remembered making it back to my chambers after the bonfire. I'd drank way too much of the potent wine floating around at the celebration. Maybe I should've heeded the prince's warning.

Glancing around, panic took over as I took in the chambers that were not my own. The silk sheets against my skin felt foreign. I sat up. Although these weren't my own chambers, I still knew exactly where I was as I spotted the tall black posts of the bed I was in.

Bellamy's room.

How had I ended up in Bellamy's bed? My head pounded as I tried to recall the rest of the night. Had I slept with the prince? Bile rose in my throat either from the effects of the alcohol or the thought that I may have slept with the prince while drunk. I tried to ease the feeling away, hoping I wouldn't be sick in the prince's bed.

Movement caught my eye across the room. The prince was stirring from sleep, where he rested on a sofa. I spotted a small black mark that marred the vibrant red material of the cushions. Bellamy sat up on the sofa, eyeing me.

My skin burned, knowing I'd made a fool of myself in front of him. Dread weighed down on me as I came to terms with what might have been my last night of freedom. Why had I drunk the damned wine?

"Did we-" I stopped myself, unable to finish the question burning the back of my mind.

The prince cocked his head at me, his brows furrowing. Realization seemed to dawn on him after a moment.

"No," he said quickly, lowering his gaze.

That was a large weight off of my shoulders. Relief rushed through me, enough to wake me up a bit more. Rubbing the sleep from my eyes, I tried to will the rest of my aches away. My body screamed at me as I moved.

Pulling back the sheets, I thanked the goddesses that my dress was completely on. At least I hadn't embarrassed myself in that way. I noticed my shoes were placed neatly beside the bed. Judging by the state I'd been in, it was almost impossible that I'd put them there. Which meant Bellamy had. I tried to ignore the emotions that brought up again.

"I'm surprised you're awake," the prince observed.

"Was I that bad?" I asked, dreading the answer.

"I won't be letting you near any fires alone anytime soon," he laughed. A genuine, deep laugh. It was strange to hear coming from him.

Not once since I'd been in Abelon had I heard the prince laugh. It was such a genuinely merry sound, and his eyes wrinkled in the corners as his smile grew. It was something I could grow used to.

The prince had saved me from myself at the bonfire. It wasn't helping the entire reason I'd been drinking the wine in the first place. To try to forget how the prince was making me feel. My heart was slowly opening up to him and I keep trying to refreeze the ice that had once been there.

Why was this happening?

I'd promised myself I wouldn't let anyone in. That I'd keep up my walls and hide my heart while I was in Abelon. Yet here I was in the prince's bed, allowing myself to feel grateful that he had helped me. I wanted so desperately to hate him, but I couldn't.

Before I could make any more poor decisions, I decided to take a bath. Slipping out of the bed, I made my way toward the washroom. As I passed the prince, I hesitated.

"Thank you," I whispered just loud enough for him to catch it. Without waiting for an answer, I continued.

The washroom was warm from the sunlight pouring in. I drew the water and let the tub fill. Deciding on oils that smelt of citrus, I poured them into the water. Once it filled, I slipped off my little silver dress. As I sunk into the water, the tension in my muscles faded. The headache I had before was finally disappearing.

The smell of fire and booze clung to my skin, and I scrubbed at it to remove it. The scent made me want to be ill, but soon it was replaced by the refreshing smell of lemons and oranges.

Tipping my head back, I let the water soak into my hair, closing my eyes and savoring the relaxation. After a hectic night I needed this small haven of peace. Finally, I lifted my head. Running my fingers through my hair, I found a bottle of soap placed to the side of the tub. I poured some into my hands and massaged my scalp. The feeling was bliss.

My headache had completely vanished, and my stomach let out a growl, reminding me I hadn't eaten. After this, I'd find breakfast.

Spending as much time as I could before the water turned cold, I lifted myself out of the tub. Cool water dripped down my body, and I looked at myself in the mirror placed in the corner. I barely recognized myself. I was still me, but something had changed. I held myself a bit taller. The curves of my body building my confidence. The weak girl who had arrived on the ship from Morwen was gone.

Grabbing a towel, I wrapped it around myself to walk back to my own room. The day had only just begun, but I still had much to do. I wanted to find Nyla to hear about the rest of her night. With every passing day, she was growing on me.

I picked out a simple outfit for the day, another blue dress. There were pieces of red and black hung in my wardrobe, but I wasn't ready to give up all of Morwen yet. They'd be waiting for me when I was. Someday I would have to leave behind who I was to become queen. I was starting to think the prospect didn't sound so horrible.

I'd be afforded freedom here. My people would remain safe. I could always guarantee that Abelon would leave Morwen untouched. As hopeful as I'd been to return home, it was becoming more of a distant dream. One I knew I had to let go of eventually. I needed to accept my new fate and find ways to build my own power here. That meant accepting that I would marry the prince.

After the orphanage and the fire, the idea didn't repulse me as much as when I arrived. I owed the prince more of a thank you than I'd given him. It was the perfect opportunity to try to mend our relationship that had started off so damned.

Finally, I worked up the courage to go back to Bellamy's room. I'd been pacing my own chambers for what felt like an eternity. If I didn't go now, I never would.

Entering, I slowly walked down the hall connecting our rooms.

"Bellamy," I called out, but there was no answer.

As I moved again, the door to the washroom opened, startling me. Bellamy stood in the doorway, with only a towel wrapped around his waist. I hadn't heard him draw a bath while I was changing.

"I'm sorry," I said frantically. He frowned, taking in my sudden loss of composure. My eyes wandered over the strong muscles that built his core, up to his eyes. I felt my face warming.

Striding by me, he made his way to his own room and I followed. I needed to tell him how I felt before I lost my nerve. Otherwise, I would never tell him I was thankful, or that I wanted to start over. This was my only chance.

Pausing, I noticed the prince was shirtless, and it was the first time I'd seen him without his long sleeves on. His arms were covered in horrific burn scars. The deep purple and red marks wrapping his arms looked like someone had wrapped hot chains around them, burning him.

He seemed to notice my stare. Following my eyes to what caught my attention. Quickly, he grabbed a long sleeve shirt he had discarded on the sofa. Pulling it on, he hid the scars from view once more.

"What are those-"

"Don't," he cut me off, the agony on his face had me frozen in place. Before I could ask anything further, a knock on the door interrupted us and a guard came running in.

"My prince," the guard bowed his head. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I have urgent news."

"Go on," Bellamy said, pulling his gaze from mine, and acknowledging the guard.

"The king has sent word. The offensive on Luheo has been set. You leave in a week," the guard finished.

I remained still as I took in everything I was hearing. The prince was leaving. Why was this the first I was hearing of it? I was to be his wife, and

he hadn't thought to mention he was leaving for an attack on another kingdom.

"I thought I wasn't set to leave for another few weeks," the prince snapped. "What changed?"

"The king decided to move up the timing. I do not know more than that, my prince," the guard said nervously.

I still didn't understand what they were talking about. Why was the king moving on Luheo? He'd just prevented war with Morwen, why start another one?

The prince dismissed the guard, pacing in the room. I waited for an explanation. Anything to tell me why Bellamy hadn't shared this with me yet.

"I'll be gone for a few days at minimum," he finally admitted.

"And were you ever going to tell me this?" I asked, placing my hands on my hips. I was growing impatient with his cryptic answers constantly. I wanted to know what was going on. I was going to be queen someday, and his wife. We needed to learn how to function as a pair.

"I'm telling you now," he murmured, running a hand through his wet hair.

Already I could tell his mood was slipping. He began pacing the room, his arms crossing tightly.

"You didn't think I needed to know?" I asked. "I'm to be your wife soon! I should know if my husband is being sent off to war!"

"And I'm to be king someday! I do not answer to your demands, or anyone else's for that matter!"

Flinching, I tried to gather my thoughts. Any remnant of patience left had disappeared. This was no use.

"You're not king yet," I snarled. "And you certainly aren't my king."

I regretted the words the moment they left my lips. I opened my mouth to take them back, but Bellamy turned his back to me.

"Leave me, please," he said, his tone low and dark.

Storming out, I left the chambers. I needed air to clear my head.

The way the prince had acted like it was no big deal made my temper boil over.

My fists were clenched as I strode through the halls. Rounding a corner, I almost ran into Cyrus. He was speaking in low whispers with another guard. The moment he spotted me he sent the other guard away.

"What's wrong?" he asked, searching my face for answers.

I shook my head, knowing if I spoke I'd burst into tears. Realizing my distress, Cyrus pulled me close. Wrapping his arms around me, he tucked my head to his chest. Part of me knew it was wrong. Anyone could see us here and report it to Bellamy or the king. The last person I should seek comfort in was the captain of the guard. He was loyal to Abelon, and its king.

But Cyrus had also become close to being a friend. I had no one else to turn to here. I couldn't go to Nyla about this, Bellamy was her brother. After a moment, I felt more relaxed, the building tension shrinking to a tiny spark.

As I went to pull away, Cyrus tightened his grip around me. The gesture seemed almost possessive. For a moment, I wondered if I'd imagined it. His hand found its way to my hair, pushing it back. It was all too much for me. His grasp, the way he ran his fingers through my hair, it was unsettling. I felt overwhelmed, alarm starting to fill my mind, my chest tightening and my breathing growing more frantic.

I didn't want this. Pushing away again, I finally broke from his grasp. His face was a mix of surprise and disappointment. Frowning, he tried to take a step toward me again.

"Don't," I whispered.

"Koraine," he tried. I shook my head, I didn't want to hear it.

My thoughts were mixed, and my confusion grew. I was betrothed to Bellamy. It could never work between Cyrus and I, even if I wanted it to.

But I knew in my heart that wasn't how I felt. There was no spark between us.

Turning around, I hurried off back the way I'd come from. The only place I could be alone was in my own chambers. I risked running into the prince again, but I didn't care. I had no time to think, my feet just moved on their own.

I arrived at the personal door that led to my room, slipping in and shutting it quickly behind me. How had this day turned to such serpent shit so fast? I held my head in hands, as I slid my back down the door. Sitting on the ground, I tried to make sense of what had happened.

My future husband was leaving for weeks and one of my few friends had just ruined everything. My life couldn't possibly become more complicated. At least the time away from the prince meant I had space to figure everything out, and hopefully make things right with Cyrus.

I'd run away like a coward. A frustrated growl left my lips. My hands slipped from my forehead back into my hair, holding back the tangles of white locks.

Anxiety took over all functions of my body. I was shaking, and my breath increased in pace. The pounding of my heart rang out in my ears. I needed to calm down.

Willing myself to take deep breaths, I kept pushing through the intense waves of panic. In and out, my chest rose with each inhale. My heart slowed, and the shaking soon stopped. I let myself sit against the door for another few minutes before forcing myself up. I had to face the day.

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BELLAMY



he dreaded day had arrived. A week after the fall solstice, I found myself standing at the docks, loading the war ships. I didn't recognize any of my men. They were not the same guards I'd been training for weeks. Instead, there were untrained citizens of Raden loading the ships.

I was overseeing all the preparations and taking no risks. Already the odds were stacked against me. The journey to Luheo would take just about a week. We would be aiming for an island to the west of Luheo's capital city Morya.

From the information our spies brought to Abelon, we'd learned that the island served as the kingdom's stronghold. A majority of their weapons and guards were kept there. It served as a training base. Hitting the island with a strong attack would change the tides of all future wars to come.

Strolling through the docks, I observed as the men worked hard to load the three large ships and ensure everything was in order. Wooden crates filled with food rations and weapons needed to be carried onto the ships.

My heart sunk as I recognized one of the men helping organize the weapons to be loaded. Striding over, I prayed I was wrong. That I had mistaken this man for someone else. When I finally made it, I knew that wasn't the case.

"Alaric?" I asked, pained to see Mariam was right.

The old man's gaze met mine. Neither of us speaking a word. The other two men who'd been helping Alaric moved on to the next set of crates that needed to be accounted for. Alaric didn't move.

"Go home," I whispered.

His eyes widened with disbelief, then turned to rage.

"I am no coward, prince," Alaric spat.

This wasn't the argument I wanted to be having. It was the first I'd seen him since our last argument, and there were so many words I wanted to say instead, but I'd made Mariam a promise. I told her I'd figure this out, and this was the best I could do, sending Alaric back home to her.

"I don't believe you to be a coward, but I promised your wife-"

"You've seen Mariam?" he asked, his entire demeanor shifting.

"Yes, and she's heartbroken with you gone," I answered, gently. "She needs you, Alaric. Those children at the orphanage need you. I'm commanding you as your prince to go home and take care of those children. They've lost enough from war and battles. They do not need to lose you as well. You've become a father figure to them. Don't do this to them. Don't do this to Mariam."

For a moment, he just watched me. I worried he might argue further. If he did, there wasn't much I could do. He needed to leave now before others noticed what was happening. If he made a commotion, others would want the same treatment I was giving him, and I couldn't afford to pardon more soldiers. I was taking a risk and abusing my position, but I didn't care. Alaric was like family, and I wouldn't see him killed in Luheo.

"Thank you," he whispered, bowing his head.

"Go now, before anyone else sees you," I instructed.

He looked like he had more to say, but didn't hesitate. Hurrying, he left the docks, heading for a street that I knew led to the orphanage. I sighed with relief. Knowing Alaric would be safe was one worry off my chest. Now I just needed to figure out how I would keep the rest of my men safe.

THE WEEK at sea was rough. Many of the men aboard the three ships had never been at sea before and were sick and useless to the rest of the crew. The soldiers spent their days in hammocks beneath the deck. I prayed they would find their sea legs before we hit Luheo. I would never win with a bunch of ill men.

Frequently, I found myself checking on the men, hoping their sickness would improve. The conditions at sea were rough, and the nights were long.

Constant storms plagued our journey, making any rest almost impossible.

Imry joined, flying most of the day and resting on the deck of the ship at night. Her body took up a large portion of the deck, leaving room for only the crew manning the ship during the night.

One particularly harsh night, most of the men gathered beneath the deck seeking refuge from the rain and lightning. Only the necessary crew remained above deck. I sat on the edge of a wooden crate, eating a particularly sour apple. One of the men passed me a bottle of alcohol. Taking a swig, I passed it along.

It was the same potent alcohol that almost sent Koraine stumbling into the bonfire. I didn't miss the way my heart picked up in pace thinking about her. Shaking my head I tried to push her out of my mind, needing to focus on the offensive.

Hopes were sinking before the real battle had even begun. I grasped for words to raise the men's spirits, but found nothing. My gaze remained on the floorboards of the ship, studying every small chip and crack in the wood. Each time a wave crashed against the ship it caused me to sway, and I let it.

Suddenly, breaking the silence one of the men began humming. The comforting tune carried through the room. I slowly recognized it, an old sea shanty that I'd heard men by the docks of Abelon sing before. I didn't know the words, but I knew the tune.

I joined in humming softly. Many of the other men did too. It wasn't much, but it was enough to bring them together once more. I spotted a few of the men bringing their makeshift tin mugs together in cheers. If we were going to walk in to this battle, at least we were doing it together.

Surviving as a group would be the bigger challenge.

"My prince," one of the crew members said at the end of the song. He was drenched and looked out of breath. "We are less than a day's journey out."

The time had finally come. After days at sea, tomorrow our journey would finally end.

"Thank you," I nodded, dismissing the man.

Standing on the wooden crate I'd been seated on, I tried to command the room's attention, but many of the men were engaged in conversations. Others were hunched over, holding their heads in their hands, trying to prevent the sea sickness from claiming them.

Using the only method I could think of, I sent a quick pulsing ring of flames outward above their heads. It disappeared within a second. Suddenly, all eyes in the room were on me, waiting for what I had to say.

"Tomorrow we'll be in Luheo," I started. I caught the sound of a few groans throughout the room. No one looked thrilled to be hearing the news. "I know that many of you didn't sign up to be here. That you are here as a favor to your king and your kingdom. I want you to know that come tomorrow, I will stand by you every second of the fight. I cannot promise that it will be easy, but if we stand together, we can win! Luheo will fall, and Abelon will rise. The power and the fate of your kingdom resides with each of you now! May our flames continue to burn everlasting!""

Once I finished, many of the men cheered out repeating the mantra and raising their glasses.

I spent the rest of the night trying to discuss strategies with the men and teach them whatever knowledge I could impart on them before we turned in for the night.

Tomorrow would be the true test of my leadership. I'd either rise to the occasion or fail my father, my kingdom, and myself.

WW

IMMEDIATELY, it was a bloodbath.

Luheo expected us. There was no possible way they should've known, and somehow they did. All of our prior preparations and plans were useless.

As my ship blew closer to land, I found an army lining the shores. Beach lined the coast of the island, a backdrop of endless forest visible on the mainland.

Tall towers stood not far from the beach, scouting our arrival. Docks were built a ways down, but we couldn't use them for our ships. It would take too long. The soldiers would be waiting to pick us off by then.

There was no retreating. Soldiers onshore manipulated the air, pulling our ships in faster, and using our own sails against us.

Hurrying, I scrambled to give the orders to lower the sails. If they couldn't pull us in, we'd have more time to prepare ourselves.

I commanded Imry to take off, flying high above the clouds. I wanted her away from Luheo's grasp, but still close enough that we could use her fire. As she took off a blur from shore caught my attention. Three large beasts took off flying after my dragon.

Their bodies were that of a lion with golden fur, but they had white wings and the head of a bird.

Griffins.

Fuck.

I had to turn this around, and fast.

I directed those with the ability to wield fire to the edge of the boat. They launched their flames at my command. The strikes helped disperse some of the soldiers on shore.

A thunderous explosion distracted me, pulling my attention right. One of my ships had taken damage from a catapult. Another boulder flew through the air, delivering the final blow to the ship. Removing the sails had made us sitting targets.

Men jumped into the water, abandoning the ship. Swimming toward shore, or our other ship, they were doomed. They'd be picked off one by one by the Luheon soldiers.

"Let them pull us in!" I shouted, running to get the sails of the ship back up. I wouldn't lose more men.

This was the only way to save our remaining two ships and prevent them from sinking. The moment the sails went back up, our ship lurched forward. The men continued to throw flames in the direction of the soldiers on shore. Only a few hit their marks.

Hitting shore, I helped the men on my ship drop the ramp down to the sand. We hurried off the ship, jumping straight into battle.

It was a mix of flames and air. Some of the men held their own, but others fell immediately. I knew bringing untrained men to Luheo would be a terrible idea, but I'd been forced into obeying my father. Defying him and refusing these soldiers would've been a grave insult.

Rushing up the beach, I threw myself into the fight. Dodging streams of air thrown by soldiers and sending my own flames barreling back at them. I danced my way through multiple men, taking down as many as I could.

We were wildly outnumbered. Each man taking on at least five Luheon soldiers. It was rapidly turning into a slaughter.

Luheo had the favor of the air goddess, Isleen, on their side as they fought.

One man beside me collapsed as a Luheon soldier pulled the air from his lungs. His lifeless body collapsed to the ground. I swore his eyes bore into me from where he laid on the sand.

The longer I fought, the more victory felt hopeless. Our only chance of survival would be to retreat.

If we stayed, we'd be dead in minutes.

There were more soldiers pouring onto the beach. If they all made it down to the shore, there would be no way to escape. They'd surround us.

"Fall back!" I shouted to the other men. There was only a handful left. "Imry!" I shouted.

The beast dove out of the sky, followed by the three griffins. She turned, spewing fire in their direction. It dispersed the beasts for a moment.

Barreling toward me, I prepared to mount my dragon. She had time to land for only a moment before we took off again together.

I tried to locate a way out of this. As Imry flew the griffins tailed us. We manuveured through the sky, keeping them at a distance. Imry continued to send her flames at the beasts when she could.

I directed her toward the approaching soldiers. Aiming at the path ahead of them, Imry let fire spill to the ground building a wall to stop the reinforcements. It would buy us time.

I held tight to my dragon as she made impossibly quick turns and dives, trying to lose the griffins. I spotted our ships on the beach below us.

Our ships were useless, now stuck in the sands of the beach after being dragged in to shore. I glanced around, trying to come up with a plan. To my left I spotted docks. There were a few ships left unattended. They would suffice.

"Bring me down," I ordered Imry. "We'll meet you at sea, head back to Abelon."

Imry landed for only long enough to allow me to jump off of her back. A griffin landed behind us, clawing at Imry. A roar escaped the dragon, as she took off again. As she flew, I saw her fierce flames soar across the sky preventing the griffins from following.

Motioning to my men, I led them in the direction of the ships. Each of us fought to keep the soldiers away. Pushing them back with whips of flame. The other men's attacks were less focused and lacked experience in battle training. I could feel myself tiring quickly, as I took on soldier after soldier.

After minutes of running and fighting, we finally made it to the docks. There were others still left behind on the beach, but if we waited, it would be too late. Only ten men out of the hundred my father had sent me with were at the docks now.

We all piled into one of the smaller wooden ships. It was no war ship, but it would make it back to Abelon. Hurrying, we got the sails up and untethered the ropes from the docks. Pushing off, I let my flames stream out onto the dock, burning it just in time as soldiers tried to catch up.

I continued to throw attacks in their direction, with the help of two of my men. It kept the soldiers distracted enough to prevent them from manipulating our sails. Once we were far enough to sea that my flames could not reach the shore, and their manipulation of air could not reach us, I finally dared to look back at the beach.

None of our men remained alive on land. The sand was littered with their bodies. How had I allowed this to happen?

AFTER SAILING FOR OVER A WEEK, I finally spotted the shores of Abelon. Imry had parted with our ship hours before to head back to the lands she dwelled at. Dread filled my chest, knowing I would have to face my father.

Most of our men were lost.

I couldn't face the families who'd be waiting at the docks. How would I tell them I led these men to slaughter? These were husbands, brothers, and sons. They were people who deserved a better fate.

My head hung heavy as I disembarked from the small ship. A group of guards were waiting to escort me. A spare horse stood ready for me. I climbed it solemnly and urged it toward the palace.

A few men and women shouted as we passed. Some throwing insults and others desperately seeking answers. I didn't have the words or courage to face them. I was a failed leader.

The ride back to the palace went by in a blur. I couldn't stop thinking of the image of those men I left behind on that beach.

I knew where I had to go the moment I walked my horse back to the palace stables.

Mindlessly, I wandered to the throne room. I knew he'd be there, waiting for me. News traveled fast in this kingdom, and my failure would be the biggest shame of all.

Entering, I found my father seated on his throne. His flames were larger and much more untamed than they normally were behind him. I could feel his fiery temper the moment I stepped foot in the room. The door slammed shut behind me, leaving us alone.

I approached, knowing what was in store for me. I knew the moment I saw the chains hanging across the arm of his chair that I could not escape punishment this time. Two poles stood before me. Stepping between them, I paused.

My father's amber eyes remained set on me. "Cyrus!" he bellowed.

The captain of the guard hurried in from the same door I'd entered only moments before. Neither of us acknowledged his entrance. We both remained trained on each other.

"Wrap these around his arms," the king said, holding out the thin chains. "And attach them to the poles."

Pulling off my shirt, I allowed Cyrus to wrap the metal chains around my upper arms. There was no use fighting it. My father would disown me, or worse, if I refused. I deserved this lesson. After leading those men to their deaths, I deserved worse.

He tightened the chains around my bare arms and pulled them tight. My arms hung suspended as he attached the chains to each of the metal poles.

I tried to prepare myself for what I knew would come next, but nothing could prepare me for the agony. My father guided his flames to the poles, climbing them. They trailed up them, and then down the chains.

Immediately, I was hit with blinding pain. The burn of the metal searing into my skin. I cried out, trying to keep myself conscious. It would all be over soon. The king never made the lessons long. Just enough to leave a permanent reminder of my failings.

I kept replaying the scene of the beach in my head. Trying to remember that those men had suffered a much worse fate. I deserved this, it was a gift compared to what they endured.

As darkness crept into my vision, I heard my father command Cyrus to help him undo the chains. They carefully used gloves to touch the hot metal. It was the same gloves our dragon breeders used when training the young hatchlings to protect their hands.

The second the metal had slack, I dropped to my knees. The chains easily slid off my arms to the floor, dropping with a loud clang.

Cyrus left the throne room, leaving me with only my father.

"Next time, you won't get another chance. Let this be your last lesson. Do not fail me in the future," he scolded, striding out of the room.

Picking myself up off the ground, I made my way back to my chambers. It took longer than I wished. I needed to take care of my wounds before they were exposed to a potential infection. Sitting on my bed, I rested for a moment. The pain was too much to bear, and I remained there for longer than I'd planned.

Another set of marks to remind me of the men I'd failed that day.

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KORAINE



discovered in the palace. She had no interest in sitting around reading, but it was my turn to choose what we did with the day.

Already, two weeks had passed since Bellamy left. I barely spoke to him after our argument and he'd left a week later. I'd also been avoiding Cyrus.

I saw him around the palace, but fortunately he was always with other guards or conducting his duties. I still didn't know what to say to him after everything that had occurred.

"Tell me why we're here again," Nyla complained, sitting at one of the tables.

"Because I want to look through the books. I didn't have anything like this in Morwen. Any books in my home were always war strategy related. You have so many options here," I explained.

"But why would you want to spend your time reading those? There are much better things you could be doing," the princess tried to convince me.

"Like swimming naked in the garden pool?" I asked, raising an eyebrow.

"That was one time! And I wasn't naked!" she complained, rolling her eyes.

I'd finally been able to find out how the rest of Nyla's fall solstice went. After leaving me, she'd joined another tipsy group of attendees. Late into the night, they all decided it would be a fantastic idea to go for a swim. The princess had ended up stripping down out of her dress to jump in. The

guards had found them and made them all leave as the bonfire had come to an end.

I laughed, knowing I'd be able to bring this up for a long time. She shoved my arm.

"Remember, I agreed to come here with you. Don't make me regret it," she teased.

"We can do anything you'd like after this," I promised her.

That seemed to delight her, and I instantly regretted the offer, seeing the fiery mischief in her eyes.

We spent the next hour looking through the stacks of books. I found a few stories that piqued my interest, and Nyla told me I could take them with me to keep in my room. I hated to disrupt the system the palace workers had, but I couldn't resist having them to read in my comfortable bed.

Sitting at one of the small desks, I organized the giant pile of books I had pulled off shelves. I needed to narrow them down, but it was an impossible task. How was I expected to decide between a thrilling adventure or a heartwarming romance? I wanted to take them all. At least I knew they'd be here waiting for me when I finished whichever ones I settled on.

After an hour, I could tell Nyla was anxious to leave. She was pacing around the rows of books, and kept looking over my shoulder as I flipped through a few of them. I'd have to come back another day without her. For now, I needed to get her out of the library.

"Alright, what do you want to do?" I finally dared to ask.

"You'll see," she said, a grin widening on her face. My heart started racing as I caught a glimmer of mischief in her eyes.

Following her from the library, I walked up one of the spiraling staircases of the palace. We continued our ascent until we reached the top floor. My stomach sunk walking the long winding halls.

Soon, I found myself staring down the door to the platform. My stomach sunk. There was no world in which I pictured myself able to climb the back of a dragon this high up.

As the door swung open, my hair blew back from the gust of wind that rushed in. The princess waltzed out onto the platform, whistling she called to Veros. It took a few tries, but finally the dark red dragon came barreling from the sky.

My heart sank, realizing I had no excuse to get out of this. The moment that dragon landed, I'd have to climb on its back. Already, Nyla was watching me, waiting for me to join her on the platform. With one step forward, I felt my legs begin to shake.

Turning back to her dragon, Nyla stepped back as Veros landed. I'd only managed a few more small steps outside. I wanted to turn around and run back inside. I viewed all of Raden from this high up. I could even spot some of the volcanoes in the distance.

With the dragon now kneeling for Nyla to climb onto her back, I had no more time to waste. I could feel the princess watching me. With a deep breath, I took a few more steps. There was only a slight distance to close, and I'd be in front of Veros. I could do it.

Closing my eyes, I took one more step. My heart was beating hard enough for me to feel with just a soft touch on my chest.

Suddenly, horns sounded. I looked around wondering if I'd imagined it. I'd never heard the horns before. They sounded similar to the war horns used by the Morwenian army. Were we under attack?

Nervously, I glanced at Nyla and found her smiling.

"Bellamy's back!" she exclaimed.

My heart dropped. I would've preferred to climb that dragon and take off into the sky.

I wasn't ready to face Bellamy. There was so much left unsaid before he left. Now he'd been gone for weeks and I still hadn't figured out what I would say to him.

Jumping off of Veros, Nyla rushed toward me.

"Come on, we've got to find out what happened in Luheo," she said, a little too cheerily. War didn't thrill me the way it seemed to excite some of the people of Abelon. This was a kingdom hungry for power. They'd been given a terrible position with their lands uninhabitable.

War horrified me. The thought of Bellamy fighting against the air kingdom made my stomach turn. I hated the idea of him being killed, or coming back injured from the invasion. Part of me was relieved to hear he was finally home. The other part still hadn't sorted through what that relief meant.

THE PALACE WAS FILLED with the chatter of the prince's arrival. The moment his ship was spotted approaching, the palace guards were alerted and sounded the horns. Guards were scattered, preparing to meet the returning soldiers at the docks.

Outside, I watched as horses were prepared, and a spare one was brought out for Bellamy. Nyla and I stood at the palace entrance as the guards left through the gates of flames.

"Come on," Nyla grabbed my hand, tugging me along.

"Where are we going?" I asked.

"The docks! I want to see him before my father forces him to the throne room when he gets back."

Letting her lead me, I trailed after Nyla. We ran through the streets, following the small crowds of people that were making their way to the docks. Word had spread fast about the prince's arrival home.

As we finally arrived at the docks, we saw the small ship that was approaching. It wasn't the same ship that had left with the prince. Suddenly, a sense of dread filled me. Where were the other two ships?

The guards we'd seen leave the palace were already lined by the docks, watching the ship as it secured its tethers to the wooden poles.

The princess and I kept our distance. Already the growing crowd of people were whispering their concerns. The prince had returned without many of his men. What had gone wrong?

Relief washed over me when Bellamy finally stepped off the ship. I hadn't realized how worried I'd been that he might not return. War was unpredictable, and loss could strike at any moment.

People shoved closer to try to view the men as they stepped off the ship. Bellamy's head hung low, and he avoided the stares of the onlookers. Some of the people in the crowd called out to him as he walked somberly to the guards. He looked lifeless as he climbed onto his horse. This wasn't the same prince that had left only weeks ago.

"Something isn't right," Nyla whispered. "There should be more of them."

Only ten men disembarked from the ship. The prince was already riding back toward the palace. He hadn't acknowledged a single person, remaining silent on his ride.

"We need to get back," Nyla said, tugging on my blouse. "Father isn't going to be pleased with him."

The way she said it made me tremble. I didn't doubt he would take this failure out on his own son.

Rushing back to the palace, we arrived minutes after the guards and prince had. The men were still walking their horses to the stable, but Bellamy was no where to be seen.

"You should head back to your room," Nyla said. "If Bellamy returns, he's going to need you."

"Need me? But-" The princess held up her hand, cutting me off.

"Please, Koraine. If you care even a little for him, you will be there when he returns. He's going to need you," she pleaded.

I nodded my head. It was no use arguing with her. She was right, whatever had happened clearly took a toll on Bellamy. I may be the last person he wanted to see, but as his future wife I needed to try.

Hurrying back to my room, I sat on my bed when I arrived. I wasn't sure what else to do with myself. My leg tapped anxiously, and I waited silently, hoping to hear the sound of his door opening. Seconds turned into minutes and the longer that passed the more sure I became that he wouldn't return to his chambers.

Standing, I began pacing the room. Where else would he go? He could've gone and found Imry. Whenever I was upset, a ride on Talay always helped calm me. If he'd left on his dragon, there was nothing more I could do. It was also possible that he was still meeting with the king. If they had failed, Luheo could be on its way here now.

A new panic set in at the prospect of a new war. I'd just prevented one with my own kingdom. Now I was about to be at the center of another.

The distant sound of a wooden door creaking pulled me from my thoughts. I heard the prince's door slam shut behind him as he entered his room.

I was still unsure whether to go in or not. Would he even want to see me? The look of pain on his face when he stepped off that ship had felt like someone stabbed my heart. I hated seeing him in such agony. I wanted to help. To take his pain away.

The only way to do that was to step through the door separating us.

Entering, I walked down the hall. It felt more endless than usual. My feet were dragging, and my heart racing. At the end of the hall, I found Bellamy.

The prince was seated on his bed, his back to me. The world stopped as I saw what covered his arms. Unable to stop myself I gasped quietly. Burns climbed up his arms, mixing with older scars. His head was in his hands, and I wasn't sure whether I should leave before he noticed my presence.

Turning in response to my gasp, the prince met my gaze. He looked completely broken. His eyes were empty of the usual spark there. Letting his shoulders hang, he dropped his head once more, staring at the floor.

"Did Luheo do this to you?" I whispered horrified.

"No," he said barely loud enough for me to hear.

The scars I'd seen before suddenly made sense. The king had done this.

I couldn't process how his own father could burn him. What type of heartless monster was he to harm his own son? My father may have sent me off to Abelon for the good of our kingdom, but he would never dare lay a hand on me.

"Why'd he do this?" I asked, taking a few steps toward Bellamy.

"Because I failed," he said so softly I almost didn't hear him.

Was he referring to what happened in Luheo? I knew men had died, but that wasn't all Bellamy's fault. A leader could only do so much to save his men. Sacrifices would always be made in war. I'd learned that much from my father.

"What happened isn't your fault Bellamy," I tried, sitting next to him on the bed. I wanted to get a closer look at his burns. They needed to be tended to, and soon.

"And how would you know that?" he snapped. "You weren't there, Koraine. You didn't have to watch those men senselessly slaughtered. And for what? For my father's amusement, to teach me a lesson? So he can build his power even more? It's unfair! I should've died with them."

"Don't say that," I breathed, my eyes widening.

"I deserve worse than what my father did to me. These burns are nothing compared to what all those men endured. The ones who made it back will never be the same. All of those families who lost someone will always wonder why they were forced to go on this invasion. And I have no answer for them! What kind of future king does that make me?"

I didn't have an answer. There was no way I could possibly understand the agony he felt right now. Only time would heal this wound, but I could help with his physical wounds. "Your burns need to be treated," I said, looking them over. I reach out a hand, but he grabbed my wrist.

"Just go," he said, his tone defeated, dropping my wrist.

I tried to grab his hand in comfort, but he pulled it away.

"Bellamy let me help. I can clean these burns for you," I said.

He refused to look at me, his head hung. His shoulders sunk inward, as he retreated further into himself.

"Just get out!" he shouted, shaking his head. The pain in his voice was raw, and my heart broke for him.

I went to stand, glancing down at the prince. I watched as he held his head in his hands again, unable to face the agony of his failure.

I made a fast decision and before I could change my mind I wrapped my arms around his neck, and held him. I felt him pull back at first, but held tight.

"It's not your fault," I whispered. I knew I couldn't fix what had happened, but I wouldn't let him face it alone.

His muscles relaxed and I felt him lean into my embrace.

"It's not your fault," I repeated, wishing he would believe the words.

He sat in silence, letting me hold him. Everything I had been trying to figure out before no longer mattered. The only thing that did was that I was here for him now.

After a few minutes, I pulled away.

"Let me clean those burns," I tried again.

He didn't answer, instead he held out an arm for me to view better. Calling on my water, I manipulated a small orb to envelope his arm. I moved it up and down, trying my best to be gentle.

A few times the prince flinched, pulling away. I continued my work, ensuring all of the burn marks were cleaned. The marks were a vibrant red and I knew this wouldn't fade for days, weeks even.

I worked in silence, every minute spent cleaning the wounds I felt my heart aching.

I finished and searched the room for bandages, finding some tucked away in a small chest set in the corner near his sofa.

I wrapped the wounds carefully, trying my best to be gentle and not pull them too tight. They just need to keep the burns clean and covered from being exposed to anything that could cause infection. After I finished, I stood. The prince held his head in his hands once more.

"Bellamy-" I started.

"Please, don't," he said, his voice shaking with agony. "I can't do this right now, Koraine." He shook his head, pushing me away.

I wanted to tell him how I felt, make him listen that this wasn't his fault. I wanted to be able to tell him things would get better, but I couldn't. I respected his space, and backed away. My chest tightened, and I knew I needed air as the reality of everything hit me.

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KORAINE



very time I thought I'd made progress with my feelings, I ended up more confused. Bellamy had pushed me away, needing space to deal with his grief. I wanted to take away his pain and help, but I knew he wouldn't let me in further right now.

Maybe he wanted to feel pain, to punish himself or remind himself. A permanent mark of whatever he'd endured to receive the scars.

Hurrying through the halls after leaving the prince, I was barely paying attention when I bumped into a solid mass.

"Ugh," I complained, as I stumbled backward.

"Watch where-" Cyrus started but cut himself off. "Koraine?"

"I'm so sorry," I began spilling out an apology, my words jumbled from my disorientation. My thoughts distracted me and I hadn't seen Cyrus stopped in the hall. This was the first I'd seen him in weeks. If I was being honest, I wasn't ready to stop avoiding him just yet.

There was no spark there, and I didn't want to hurt his feelings. I was also set to marry the prince, and I still hadn't figured out all of my feelings with him either.

"Listen-" I started.

"It's alright. I shouldn't have moved so quickly with you," Cyrus interrupted. "I know you've been going through a lot here."

I nodded my head slowly, unsure if he understood how I actually felt. He closed the distance between us, and I took a step back. I found my back pressed against the wall. Again he reached out to my face, moving the tiny braid that hung against my cheek to behind my ear. I flinched at his touch.

I wanted him to stop.

"Cyrus," I tried, but I wasn't sure what to say.

"Shhh," he whispered, running his hand along my neck.

The way he silenced me made my blood boil and my nose flare. A friend wouldn't do this. They wouldn't put me in this position. Maybe everything Bellamy had said about Cyrus had some merit to it.

"Stop," I demanded, slapping his hand away from my neck. "I'm trying to talk to you, Cyrus."

Leaning in, he pressed his forehead to mine. I turned my head away, unable to look him in the eyes. My stomach turned, and I tried to slip away, but he pushed me back to the wall, keeping a tight grip on me.

"And if I don't want to talk?" Cyrus asked.

"You don't have a choice," I snarled. I was sick of this game. If he wouldn't listen to me, then I'd be forced to make him hear me. Enough was enough.

"I'm getting married, Cyrus," I pleaded. "Please don't do this."

"Oh, come on, Koraine! You don't even want to marry him. I've seen the way he treats you. Your distaste for him. I've been the one there for you since you arrived."

"I have to marry him," I defended. I wasn't sure why I was explaining myself to Cyrus. I didn't owe him anything. Soon, I'd be his future queen. There was no reason I should have to provide him a reason why I didn't want this. My plea for him to stop should've been enough.

"Have to?" Cyrus laughed. "That's a joke, right? He treats you like you're some prize he's won. Like you owe it to him. I could give you so much more. How can you not see that?"

"My people are relying on me, Cyrus!" I was growing impatient and frustrated. "I'm doing this for them. Not because I wanted to leave my home to become queen of a kingdom that hates me. I'm here to protect my people. My family. I can't do this, let me go," I said, trying to push him away.

"You're a fool if you think he'll protect your people," Cyrus snarled, showing me a new side to him. His hands warmed as he called small sparks of flame to them. His grip was hot against my waist. His other hand held my wrists above my head, preventing me from shoving him again.

"I know you want this, Koraine. You're just blinded because of him. I've seen how you look at me versus him. You want me and I want you. I

won't let him take you from me when he doesn't even want you. I was willing to look past who your father was. Can he say the same?" Cyrus said.

He was hurting me, burning me. His resentment toward Bellamy was out of control.

I tried to move, but he was much strong than me. A shiver ran down my spine the closer he leaned toward me.

"Enough!" I shouted, hoping someone might hear me.

Tears were welling in my eyes. If I kissed him, would he let me go? I just wanted this nightmare to be over. Never had I felt so violated. I couldn't do anything about this. My skin no longer felt like my own as he burnt it.

His hand let go of my wrist and grabbed my chin. The force of his grasp pained me. Forcing me to face him, he smirked. Was I imagining it or was he getting off on the power he had over me?

It was disgusting.

Vile.

A tear slipped down my cheek.

"Please, Cyrus. Stop!" I tried to say through broken words. I caught a flash of movement over his shoulder.

"Take your hands off your future queen," Bellamy's deep voice threatened from behind Cyrus. I couldn't see past his large body, but I knew the prince was watching carefully.

Cyrus dropped his grip on me. Stepping away, he smirked.

"Bellamy," he drawled. "How convenient that you're here. Your future wife was just sharing how she prefers my company to yours."

"Leave," Bellamy demanded. How could he remain so calm? Cyrus was taunting him. Trying to provoke him.

Cyrus just shrugged. I wasn't worth the hassle of fighting with the prince. Striding off, I watched as Cyrus glanced back one more time. The look on his face made me want to be sick. He looked pleased with what he'd done. Was this all revenge for what my father had done?

I couldn't breathe. Holding my chest, I felt like I'd been stabbed. I dropped to the floor unable to hold myself up any longer. The prince moved in fast, catching me and lowering me slowly. I sat with my back to the wall, trying to slow my breathing.

Bellamy sat in silence beside me. He didn't dare touch me. I could tell he wanted to reach out. I saw the glances he gave my hand, but he didn't. "You can conquer this, these feelings are only temporary," Bellamy whispered.

"What?" I asked, turning to face him.

"You can conquer this, these feelings are only temporary. It's what my mom used to tell me when I couldn't calm myself down as a child."

It was the first time I'd heard him speak of his mother. He was right. I was stronger than this. I'd survived so much and had grown since coming to Abelon. I wouldn't let this ruin me. Cyrus had no power over me, except for what I gave him. I was done being afraid. Next time, I'd fight back.

My heart filled with anguish as I noticed the longing look on Bellamy's face. I knew he missed his mother, I could tell.

"I really didn't know she had died. I'm so sorry," I began.

"It's alright."

"It's not. It's unfair! You have every right to be upset, and I understand why you hate my people. If what I was told is true and they killed her just to get at your father, its unthinkable. Disgusting. I cannot imagine growing up without my mother. I almost lost my own father in the war, and I can't imagine if I had," I said, shaking my head.

"You really didn't know?" Bellamy asked, cocking his head at me.

"No. We never heard the news in Morwen. If the king ordered the execution, then it was in secret. He never told us when she died."

It didn't make any sense. It wasn't like the king of Morwen to miss the opportunity to brag about the power he had over Abelon. I believed every word Bellamy, and the others said, but I still couldn't understand the secrecy.

"That makes no sense," Bellamy said.

I shrugged. I didn't understand it either.

"I'm glad you came," I said, looking at Bellamy. I tried to read him as my words registered. His face remained trained.

"I'm sorry," he admitted. "I should've told you I was leaving and I shouldn't have pushed you away. As soon as you left, I regretted it."

It was such a small gesture, but it meant a lot to me. His apology meant more than just sorry.

Reaching out, I grabbed his hand. I was surprised when he didn't pull away. He gave mine a gentle squeeze, and we sat like that for a while.

After a bit, I began to feel better. Standing, I used the wall to gain my balance. I no longer felt ill, and as I stood, my eyes felt heavy. The entire

ordeal had drained me. Turning to head back to my room, I paused, knowing the prince was still standing behind me.

"Why'd you stop him?" I asked. My back was still to him. I couldn't bring my self to turn around. I was terrified of the answer he might give.

"Because I don't share what's mine," he said, the heat of his gaze burned into my back.

I sensed him taking a step closer. Holding my breath, I waited. His large frame towered over me, and I could tell he was only inches away now.

His hand slid slowly around my neck, barely grazing my skin and brushing a gentle thumb against my cheek. I tilted my head ever so slightly up, letting his gentle touch caress my skin. My heart was racing, and I was sure he could feel the quickening of my pulse in my neck. The warmth spreading across my skin sent butterflies into my stomach.

"I belong to no one," I whispered, the confidence in my voice wavering. "Say that again," he dared.

Moving his hand, he tilted my chin to look back at him. My eyes found his dark gaze.

"I belong to no one," I repeated. This time more confident than before. I decided who I wanted and who I didn't. This was my life, my body, and I got to choose what happened to it.

Turning, I was chest to chest with the prince. The heat building between us was heightened. For a moment, I thought he might walk away. I wanted him. In this moment I knew it. Reaching a hand up, I rested it on his face, my thumb circling his cheek.

"Good, this time I believed it," he said. "You decide your fate, Koraine."

He glanced to my wrist where Cyrus had burnt me. Reaching his own hand up he covered mine. Pulling it back he raised my hand to his lips, and trailed a gentle kiss over my burnt wrist.

My heart raced, and my stomach felt like a million ember butterflies were flying around. I wanted to kiss him, but part of me held back.

I brought my hand back to his face, leaning in closer. For a moment I thought he may kiss me. I searched his gaze, desperate for any hint of what he was thinking.

Suddenly Bellamy pulled back. His rich eyes stared into mine.

"You ignite a different type of fire in me. One that I'm afraid if I give in to, I will never be able to let you go," he whispered. Stepping back he let

go.

I watched as the prince turned and walked off. Shocked, I couldn't bring myself to move.

I stood frozen until I could no longer see him. Returning to my own chambers, I found myself even more confused than before.

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BELLAMY



"On't ever worry me like that again," Nyla scolded me.

She'd known from the moment I got back what our father would do. I hated that she had to see me this way, but I couldn't clean some of the wounds myself and needed new bandages. I didn't want to ask Koraine. She'd only worry more about me, and I still wasn't sure I was ready to face her after the prior night.

I'd acted impulsively kissing her wrists. If I gave myself fully to her, there'd be no going back. The thought of her changing her mind, or denying me had terrified me and I'd pushed her away again before I could find out.

I wanted to kill Cyrus for even touching her, but I knew I couldn't. He was in my father's favor and harming him would be a direct challenge of the king. After my last lesson I didn't know if my body could withstand another lesson so soon.

"It's not that bad," I told Nyla.

She was turning into our mother, constantly worrying about me. I couldn't imagine what she'd think if she saw me now, the way I'd let our kingdom down. She'd loved Abelon more than anything. To see those men die would've broken her heart.

"Are you serious?" she shouted. "You have to be joking," she laughed nervously.

I didn't answer.

"These burns are worse than last time! They're going to leave some serious scars, Bellamy. Why didn't you fight back? Why do you let him do this?" she pleaded with me.

She knew as well as I did that wasn't possible. No one dared defy the king. If I fought back against this, he'd find another way to teach me a lesson. I worried that if it wasn't me, then it'd be Nyla.

"You know I can't do that," I murmured. Her displeasure was written all over her face. "It'd only prolong the inevitable and make him angrier."

"I know, I just wish it were different. If mom were here, she'd never allow this." The truth behind her words stung. Our kindhearted mother would've stood up to our father. She was the only one he had ever been willing to listen to reason from. She'd always argued with him to go easier on me as a child.

Nyla took my silence as a cue to change the subject. Neither of us liked to dwell on the past, or things we couldn't change. It only brought more pain to our hearts.

"So why didn't you ask your wife to do this?" she pried. "You know her room is right there?" Nyla pointed down the hall that connected my chambers to Koraine's room.

"She's not my wife yet," I murmured. Nyla hit my arm.

I winced at the sting of pain, and she instantly drew back. Her eyes widened with horror, realizing she'd hit my burns.

"I'm so sorry," she began, but I held up my arm and gave a small chuckle.

"It's alright," I assured her. "She has enough to worry about, and I don't want her dragged any more into our father's cruelty."

It was partially the truth. The part I left out was how I was still reeling over the moment we'd shared the night before. I was avoiding Koraine until I figured out what everything had meant. After leaving so abruptly, I wasn't sure she'd ever give me another chance.

I needed to worry about Abelon and its people right now. I couldn't have another distraction pulling me away from my duties. Once I was married to Koraine, it would solidify the peace between our people, but that didn't solve our new conflict with Luheo.

My father would never sit by and let Luheo come to us. I fully expected him to call a war meeting any day now. The question was whether I'd be included this time. I'd failed and embarrassed him. I might not be given another chance to prove myself. It'd be back to the dull and repetitive duties of being prince. Train every day, memorize our kingdom's history, and play to the favor of the noble families.

That wasn't the type of king I wanted to be. I wanted to know our people. All of them. Not just the ones with enough power and money to persuade the royal family. My visits to the orphanage had only reinforced this. These people needed change.

I wouldn't be the king who forced his people to fight in a battle they weren't ready for. The kingdom needed a compassionate ruler. One who understood their plights and took them seriously.

"You can't push Koraine away forever. Sooner or later you'll have to let her in, Bellamy."

"I know. Just not yet," I said. Nyla frowned, but continued cleaning my burns.

Another a few minutes of sitting through the sting of her cleaning, it was finally done. Using clean bandages, together we wrapped my arms to cover the blistering skin. I'd have to keep changing out the bandages frequently until the wounds healed enough where infection was no longer a concern.

My arms would still be covered in new scars, but I didn't care. I covered them from most of the world anyway, and they'd be a permanent reminder to do better.

"There, all done," Nyla said, admiring her work on my arm. "Now can we please go eat? I'm famished!" she dramatically stretched out the last part.

"I'm sure Ervin has something delicious cooking for lunch," I assured her.

Following Nyla to the kitchen, we walked the halls of the palace together. It was the first time in a while I'd really spent time with her. I'd been so caught up in my duties and preparing for the invasion I'd forgotten to check in on my own sister.

As we walked, Nyla told me about all the chatter she'd heard about the noble families and gossip from around the palace. When I took over as king, she'd be a valuable source of information. I'd make her one of my closest advisers.

"Ronan's family has proposed a marriage to the Saulenere's daughter," Nyla said, causing my eyebrows to raise.

Ronan finally committing to marriage was huge news in the kingdom. He'd been with a new woman every week for as long as I could recall. The Saulenere family was one of the wealthiest noble families in Abelon.

Combining the two families' riches and power would be a future headache for me. That was big news indeed.

"I didn't think the day would ever come when Ronan finally got married," I joked.

"Neither did I," Nyla laughed.

Rounding a corner, two guards were rapidly approaching us. One of them was Cyrus. I wanted to burn his sniveling face. He'd assaulted my future wife. My first act as king would be to remove him from his position as captain of the guard.

"Prince. Princess," the other guard said, bowing his head. Cyrus didn't bother with the formalities.

Nyla stiffened next to me.

"What do you want?" I snarled at Cyrus.

"Your father wants to see you immediately," Cyrus shrugged. "I wouldn't keep him waiting. He didn't seem to be in a very patient mood," Cyrus finished with a cruel grin.

The two guards hurried off, leaving me alone with Nyla once more.

"I'll come with you," she started.

"Absolutely not! You go find us food, and I'll meet you to eat as soon as I'm finished with Father."

She gave me a weary look, but didn't argue. I watched as she headed in the direction of the kitchen. As soon as she was no longer in view, I made my way to the throne room.

Striding through the doors to the throne room, I yet again found myself standing before my father. The poles and chains from the prior day had long disappeared. Now all that stood in the room was the throne atop the dais.

I could already sense the impatience emanating from my father. He was tapping the fingers of one hand on top of the arm of his throne and manipulating a small flame in his other hand. The moment he saw me, he extinguished it.

"Finally," he murmured, as if it were my fault I'd taken so long to arrive. I'd come straight to the throne room from running in to Cyrus. I

wouldn't put it past the captain to have taken his time finding me just to upset my father before I arrived to him.

"You summoned me?" I asked.

"Yes, I've made a final decision about your wedding," he said.

Was he still going through with it or would Koraine be sent back to Morwen? I tensed with anticipation, waiting to hear his decision.

"The wedding will take place in a few days and we'll host a ball the night before to welcome the attendees to Raden. I've already sent the invites for the ball. I expect this won't be an issue for you," my father said.

In only a few days, I'd be married. I knew how this all worked, a ball as one final display before we exchanged vows. The king wanted to flaunt our so called love to the nobles. Win them over to whatever big plans he had for Koraine and I. Then the next day, a priestess would witness our exchange of vows and we'd be wedded.

By the end of the week, I'd be married to Koraine.

"Also, you will have that girl obedient by the wedding. I want to hear the daughter of General Neroe pledge herself to Abelon when you say your vows," he said his eyes narrowing on me. "If I don't believe it, I will have her killed. I have no use for a liability in this kingdom. Not after your failure with Luheo."

There it was. The temper I'd been expecting. My father was still bitter about Luheo, and he'd take it out on Koraine if I didn't fully cooperate with his plans. I wasn't sure how I'd get her to agree to the idea in such a short time.

Asking her to marry me for the good of her people was one thing, but asking her to betray those people and pledge loyalty to my own kingdom was another. It'd only been a few months of her being here. She'd never abandon her people like that.

"Loyalty takes time," I started.

"Luheo is preparing for war. We don't have time. We need the power Morwen has. They may have agreed to peace, but they won't jump into war for us. We need a way to convince them. Force them. Do you want our people to all end up like the men you took on that invasion when Luheo does show up?"

I didn't, but there had to be another way. Asking Morwen to go to war couldn't be the only option.

"No, but-"

"I warned you, Bellamy! Don't test my patience. You'll agree to this, or this will be the last lesson you learn," he threatened. "I don't care what it takes. Win her over at the ball, make sure the kingdom believes you're in love, and make sure she says the words I want to hear at the wedding. Fail and it will be your last time disappointing me."

Would my own father kill me? I could handle his cruel lessons, but would he take it further than that? I knew he'd kill Koraine. There were a thousand ways to make it look like an accident. I needed to protect her from his grasp.

"I won't fail you," I conceded.

"Good, now I suggest you go find your future wife. And make sure she does not embarrass us at this event. The others have been bad enough. Cyrus tells me you had to prevent her from falling into a fire at the fall solstice. Why were you not with her?" the king asked.

"I was keeping the nobles happy," I argued.

"That is part of her role here too. She would do best to learn that fast. I expect better of you," the king finished.

"Yes, Father," I said, hoping he'd dismiss me.

"You're dismissed," my father said, lazily flicking his hand at me. Flames sprung to life building a wall between us. My father disappeared behind them, leaving me to figure out a plan.

I KNEW I should find Koraine, but I was hungry, and I wanted to find Nyla first. Heading for the small dining space we often met in, I found her seated at the table. It was a simple little room with a stone table. It wasn't used often by others in the palace.

"I got us a bit of everything," Nyla said, motioning to the plates of food on the table.

I spotted fish flavored with spices, a plate of cheeses and bread, and a few side dishes of vegetables.

"I wasn't sure what you'd want," Nyla explained.

'Thank you," I said, sliding into the seat beside her.

I quietly ate a plate of food I pieced together from the options before me. Once finished, I set aside my fork, looking to my sister.

"Father has decided the wedding will be in a few days," I blurted out. Nervously, I searched her face for a reaction.

I wasn't sure how Nyla would feel about me being married so soon. Koraine was still learning our ways and settling into her role here. Dropping her utensil, Nyla stared at me.

"Seriously?" she asked, shocked. I nodded. "I'll have to help Koraine find a dress for the event, then, I suppose."

"That's it? You aren't at all worried about me getting married in a few days?"

"Bellamy, of course I am," she said sympathetically. "But we both knew this was coming, and with how things in Luheo turned out, I really can't say I am surprised father decided to move things along faster. It's a better position of power to be in before war."

I sighed. She was right, but I still wished things would slow down.

"Why do you always have to be so logical?" I teased.

"Someone around here has to be," she said, grinning. "It certainly isn't you." She gave me a pointed look.

"So, which one of us is going to tell Koraine she's about to be married?" Nyla asked.

I gave her a pleading look. If the news came from Nyla, she might take it better. I couldn't just waltz into her room and announce we were to be married in a few days after how I left her the night before.

"Fine, but you owe me for this," Nyla said, picking up another slice of bread and pairing it with cheese. "She's not going to be thrilled about this."

"No, she will not," I murmured.

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KORAINE



neaking down into the palace kitchen was my only goal for the day. I wasn't sure if I was allowed to take food, but I'd missed my usual breakfast with Nyla, staying in bed, replaying the moments of the prior night. Everything that happened with Cyrus was still burnt into my mind as a permanent image.

Glancing out the small window in my room, I pulled on a loose white blouse and a blue, flowing skirt. Outside, I spotted a small, red blur of movement. Pushing open the window, I poked my head out. Just to the right of my window an ember butterfly floated. The little sparks trailing away from it were mesmerizing. How could something so destructive, like fire, also be so beautiful?

"Hey there," I said, holding out my hand. The ember butterfly landed in my palm.

I watched as slowly its flames calmed, as to not burn me. The slow flutter of its wings told me it was ready to take off at any moment. Up close, I spotted the mix of reds, oranges, and splashes of black that made the creature so stunning.

After a moment, the butterfly took off once more. I watched out the window until I could no longer see it. We didn't have such creatures in Morwen. There were other creatures native to my home, but nothing like this. I'd grown up with sea serpents and ice snakes, which only came out during the winter. Their small white bodies blending with the ice and snow covering the ground. If one wasn't careful, they'd fall prey to the snake's venomous bite that froze all bodily functions.

As the butterfly disappeared from sight, I decided it was time to make my way to the kitchen. I'd already memorized the route to take. Living in the palace, I was learning which halls were always filled with people, and which to take when one wanted to be left alone. Today I took the halls less traveled.

Arriving in the kitchen, I could smell the remnants of breakfast. The delicious scent of cinnamon wafted through the air. I let my nose guide me to the food.

Avoiding the cooks moving through the kitchen, I tried to find at least a fruit or pastry to steal as my meal. The cooks were busy cleaning up breakfast and preparing for lunch, none of them noticed me. Finally, I found a bowl of fruits sitting aside. I grabbed a green apple and plum, hoping they wouldn't be missed. A small pie to the left of the bowl caught my eye. I immediately knew this was the cinnamon I'd detected earlier. A warm apple pie.

Putting the green apple back, I began cutting a slice. I needed to work fast or-

"Can I help you?" a deep voice behind me asked.

Turning, my cheeks warmed a bright red as I found myself face to face with one of the cooks.

"I'm so sorry," I started, extending the plum out to him. If I just apologized and gave the food back, maybe he wouldn't report this to the prince or king.

He let out a deep, warm chuckle. It was the type of laugh that shook the old man's belly and had him grinning from ear to ear. I tilted my head, drawing my brows together.

Why wasn't this cook upset with me? I was stealing from their kitchen. Even if I was their future queen, I was still a Morwenian. A fact that many around the palace couldn't forget no matter the length of time I was there.

"You can keep that. I didn't expect to find you down here, Koraine," he said.

"You know my name?"

"We all do. Although I suspect not as many are willing to talk to you around here," he said, raising an eyebrow.

It was like he'd read my mind. It was strange knowing that the workers around the palace knew more about me than I'd thought. They just still didn't trust me enough to approach me.

"Join me for tea," the old man requested, suddenly.

With no other obligations for the day, I hardly had a reason to deny him. If he'd let me keep the slice of pie in my hands, I'd do anything he requested.

"Are you sure?" I asked, warily.

Seeing him with me might make the other cooks distrustful of him. I didn't want to cause him any trouble. He was kind enough to let me keep my meal. Again he laughed.

"Don't worry about me. They all answer to me around this part of the palace," he explained.

So he was the head cook. I would've never guessed.

"Fine, tea it is then," I said.

THE KITCHEN of the palace had a door that led straight out to a stone patio beside it. There was a table set up with three chairs, and a small vegetable garden planted in a built up wooden structure to the left of it.

I'd learned the cook's name was Ervin, and he'd instructed me to sit at the table while he prepared the tea. In the time I sat alone, I hurried to eat my pie. My stomach was growling, and the delicious smell had my mouth watering.

Ervin finally appeared and I was slowly snacking on the plum I'd taken, with no remnants of the pie remaining. Seeing that I'd already finished, Ervin laughed.

"I guess I should've brought more pie," he joked. "I'm glad someone enjoys my secret recipe."

"You made the pie?" I asked. It was a silly question. Of course, the head cook would've been the one to make such a divine combination of flavors.

"It's a recipe passed down through generations in my family. The key isn't in the apples, it's the cinnamon," he said, winking at me.

Once I was queen, I'd have to inquire about using the kitchen. With enough practice, I was sure I could recreate something similar. Or if I was lucky, maybe Ervin would agree to teach me.

Pouring the steaming water from a kettle, Ervin made us each a cup of hot green tea. As it hit my lips, I was instantly taken back to home. Sitting by the fireside after a particularly cold winter day and drinking warm tea made by my mother. Back in Morwen the popular choice was peppermint. I'd have to see if I could get any peppermint tea while in Abelon.

"How are you finding Abelon?" Ervin asked.

The simple question surprised me. No one had asked me how I liked the kingdom.

"Honestly," I said, glancing up from my tea. "It's very hot here," I laughed, which brought a grin to Ervin's face.

"I suppose it is compared to Morwen. You're used to harsh winters, not the extreme summers of our kingdom. Is the palace life everything you thought it'd be?"

"Not at all. Arriving, I thought I'd be stuck straight in a cell. I had no idea I'd be able to wander the palace and city like this. It's been better than I could've imagined."

"I'm glad to hear it. And the food?" he asked with a mischievous grin.

"Hmmm..." I pretended to ponder the question. "It could use some work," I shrugged.

His eyes widened, and he studied my face. I tried to train my features, but I couldn't last more than a minute. Bursting into laughter, Ervin seemed relieved.

"The food is amazing. Every day surpasses my expectations," I assured him.

"Good, because I was going to have to consider quitting if you thought otherwise."

"Never! Then I wouldn't be able to get more of this apple pie," I said, hoping Ervin would never leave his job at the palace so long as I was here.

That seemed to amuse him. Pouring us a second cup of tea each, we enjoyed the beautiful morning outside together. Ervin had many questions about Morwen, and I shared stories of my home and family with him. It was the first time I felt I could really share about my life before coming to Abelon.

Ervin told me all about the palace and the royal family. His family had served in the palace for generations. He'd started as a stable hand, until the queen had given him a chance in the kitchen. Working hard, he'd eventually become the head cook.

"That must've taken a while," I guessed.

"Years and years of hard work and determination, but if you put your mind to something, you can achieve anything," he answered.

Ervin shared some of his favorite shops and places to grab food in Raden, which I promised I'd try.

"Where has your favorite place in Raden been?" he asked.

"The docks," I answered a bit too quick. "I just miss living by the water is all," I explained before he thought I was planning an escape.

"Ah, so you've been to the lower parts of the city," he said, and I nodded. "I have a good friend that runs an orphanage there. I'll have to pay him a visit soon," Ervin said thoughtfully.

Suddenly, it made sense. The orphanage. The sack the prince carried that day.

"You send food to the orphanage?" I guessed. Ervin looked surprised at first, but then understanding hit.

"You've seen the prince in the city," he guessed.

"I may have followed him one day," I admitted.

"Bellamy brings the orphanage what can be spared. I help when I can, but mostly I just turn a blind eye to him taking the food. If the king found out what he was doing, he'd be punished." My eyes widened as I took in his words. "And I imagine I'd be looking for a new job," he chuckled.

My heart sunk, remembering what one of the king's punishments looked like when the prince returned from Luheo, the burns that covered his skin extensive. He was risking everything to help the orphanage. I could tell Ervin was studying my face.

"Bellamy isn't as bad as you may think. He's a decent man, and will make a good king someday. It may be worth giving him a chance," Ervin said.

"If only it were that simple," I sighed.

I had a lot to consider after my conversation with Ervin. Needing to clear my head for a little, I decided a ride with Talay couldn't hurt. If anything, it'd put me in better spirits.

Walking back through the palace, I made my way to the front entrance. Before I could make it outside, I saw the princess heading in my direction.

"Koraine!" the princess shouted, waving to me. I wasn't in the mood for company, but I also had no way of avoiding her.

She finally caught up to me and I gave her a friendly greeting, hoping I could get rid of her quickly. I just needed time on my own to gather my thoughts. I'd catch up with Nyla later.

"I have news," she said. She seemed nervous, playing with a strand of her long hair.

"What's the matter?" I asked, worried now. Had something happened to Bellamy? Was Luheo finally make its move on the kingdom?

"My father set a date for the wedding," Nyla said, her gaze barely meeting mine. I could tell she hadn't wanted to be the one to deliver the news to me.

Why hadn't Bellamy come to tell me?

"Oh," I said, surprised. I'd assumed the worst.

"It will happen in a few days and he's invited all the attendees to a ball the night before."

I now knew why she'd looked so nervous. She feared the news would upset me. Realizing that I'd be married before the end of the week was hard to process, but I'd known it would come any day now. I'd been prepared to accept my fate. There would be no more wondering now. In a few days, I'd be Bellamy's wife, and the future queen of Abelon.

"I'm sorry," Nyla said, watching me carefully.

There was no reason for her to apologize. I'd allowed myself to be taken to Abelon. I'd given up efforts of escaping or finding a way out of the marriage. Instead, I'd put my people first. I wanted to be here. It meant that Morwen would be at peace with Abelon for years to come.

No more war and death plaguing our kingdom. Families wouldn't be split because of Abelon anymore. If I could promise that type of peace, then I'd happily marry Bellamy.

"I knew this day would come. At least it means I gain a sister," I said, smiling at her.

Nyla picked up her head, eyeing me. Throwing herself at me, she hugged me tightly. The gesture made me feel more sure of my decision. Even if her father was the king, I'd seen how he treated his children. I had no reason to believe them loyal to the man.

"I have to go into the city, but how about I let you pick out proper dresses for me tomorrow for this ball and wedding?" I asked.

THE END of summer had finally come. The air outside was cool, and the breeze felt divine against my skin. The change had come fast, and I was grateful that the summer heat was finally disappearing.

Walking to the docks, my head was swirling with thoughts. I had so much to consider now. The rapidly approaching ball, my marriage in a few days, and that moment with Bellamy. All I could think about was the way his lips set tiny fires across my skin. I wanted so desperately to forget. He wanted nothing to do with me. Yet, here I was again, wishing I could relive it.

A small frustrated grumble left my mouth as I climbed into my small boat.

I may have accepted my fate, but I wished I had more time to figure out everything with Bellamy before our wedding day.

Paddling out to sea, I used my abilities to propel the boat further out into the vast water. I found Talay rather quickly. He let me climb onto his back and we took off. Exploring the waves, and soaking in the time I got out at sea.

After a few minutes, I spotted something in the distance. As my eyes adjusted to the bright sun reflecting off the water, a ship was rapidly approaching us. Thinking nothing of it, I brushed off the unmarked ship as fishermen wandering further than usual or merchants heading to Abelon with trade.

The ship approached, and with a bette view I knew I was wrong. The men on the ship were no fishermen, and they were eyeing my serpent and me like they'd won a prize.

I tried to throw up a wall of water, but their flames reached me first, knocking me off the serpent. Talay was hit by a whip of fire, and the sound that came from the serpent pained me. Only one type of person would attack someone like this out in the sea. These were smugglers.

I didn't want them to harm Talay or capture him.

"You have to go," I said to the serpent.

Controlling the water, I created a small vortex and hopped into it. Leaving my serpent, I aimed the vortex for the ship. I would hold them off while Talay escaped. At first, the serpent gave me a pleading look, remaining by my side.

"Go!" I begged, my voice breaking. I was unable to bear if he ended up hurt or killed. The sea serpent still didn't budge. "Go!" I shouted, frantically.

Reluctantly, Talay ducked beneath the surface of the water and left. I was alone with the smugglers. My vortex carried me onto the ship and I sent a stream of water toward them, but they blocked it with their flames.

Three on one was no fair fight, but I had no choice. Deep down I was a fighter, and I wouldn't give up so easily.

I manipulated water to cover the lengths of my arms, extending out like my own personal tentacles. I struck with precision, knocking down one of the smugglers. The other two retaliated, sending full streams of flame at me. I had just enough time to throw up my arms as a shield, the water protecting me from the intense heat of the fire.

The flames evaporated the water that had covered my arms, leaving me exposed.

A whip of flame lashed out, grabbing at me. It wrapped around my wrist and forced me to my knees as I crumpled over in agony. I cried out, trying to manipulate more water but the pain was too much to bear. Immediately, I found myself tangled in ropes as the smugglers set to work tying me up. The binds were wrapped tightly around my ankles and wrists, and I couldn't move my limbs well enough to call on the water. They'd rendered me powerless.

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BELLAMY



fter Nyla left me, I knew she'd gone to find Koraine. I returned the plates Nyla had stolen from the kitchen. Already, the cooks were bustling around preparing for dinner. I spotted a stew being prepared. It would need to cook the majority of the day.

Glancing around, I tried to find Ervin. I wanted to let him know that Alaric was safe after everything that happened with Luheo.

After a bit of wandering, I finally found him outside, sitting at a small table by himself. He was staring into the distance, lost in thought. As the door shut behind me, his head snapped toward me.

"Bellamy," he said cheerily. "Just the man I wanted to see!"

Ervin never usually seemed this excited to see me. What had gotten into him today?

"I met your lovely betrothed today."

And there it was. He'd talked to Koraine. I wasn't surprised that he liked her so much. She was a mystery, especially to Abelonians. Ervin loved learning about other people and their pasts. I'd learned that very quickly growing up and spending time around him. The old man could talk for hours, sharing stories.

"What did she tell you?" I asked too quickly.

The old man gave me an odd glance. Why did I care what they discussed? Koraine had just as much a right to spend time with Ervin as I did.

"She told me about her home," Ervin said. "Her family and the things she missed. I told her about life growing up in the palace and Abelon. I'm sorry if I crossed a line, I'd just invited her to share tea. She looked like she needed someone to talk to when I found her wandering the kitchen."

"She was in the kitchen and you convinced her to sit down for that hot leaf juice you love?" I asked.

It was odd. I knew Koraine wandered freely through the palace, but the kitchen seemed like an unlikely place for her to want to be. The palace kitchens were always hectic, and there wasn't much room for anyone beyond the few cooks who worked tirelessly all day.

"She was taking food," Ervin shrugged. "Must've missed breakfast. And I'll have you know, tea is much more than just leaf juice."

She hadn't left her room for breakfast today. Maybe I'd underestimated how upset she'd be after I left her the night before. Was she angry with me? Or was she struggling with what had happened with Cyrus? I cursed myself for not checking on her.

"She also mentioned that she saw you taking food to the orphanage," Ervin said, crossing his arms. "You really should be more careful, Bellamy. If the wrong person saw you..." he trailed off.

He didn't need to finish. I knew what he meant. If someone told my father what I'd been doing, things would only get worse for the orphanage. My father would never allow it. He'd ensure they never saw another scrap of food. It would be unfair for the palace to favor only one orphanage in the lower city. It would cause riots in the streets and protests at the palace gates. People would demand food.

I knew this all, and yet I still brought Alaric and Mariam food. I couldn't stop, they needed the extra help. Those children wouldn't survive long without it. They were already frail, and I hated to think how many times they went without a full warm meal.

"I know, I know. I'm careful. It won't happen again," I assured Ervin. "The king tried to send Alaric off to Luheo to fight," I said, changing the subject.

"I assumed he would. There were whispers in the halls that the offensive was made up of those from the lower city, and when you left, I noticed many of the soldiers never went with you."

"I sent Alaric home before we left," I admitted.

"He let you?" Ervin asked, surprise.

"I didn't take no for an answer. I reminded him that Mariam and those children needed him. He would be no use to them dead. I'm glad I did or I

don't think he would've made it back," I said solemnly.

"I heard about the large number of losses, I'm so sorry," the old man sighed.

I knew he genuinely meant it. Ervin was a part of that community. Even if he lived in the palace, I knew he felt more connected with the lower city.

"There was nothing more I could do for them," I said unsure if I was trying to convince myself or Ervin of that. "I barely made it back with ten men. It was a slaughter. Somehow, they knew we were coming."

"They knew?" he questioned.

I hadn't given it much thought, but a spy must've alerted them to our approach. There was no other way for them to know we were coming, even the men going were picked last second.

"Unfortunately. They were extremely prepared for our arrival," I said my tone turning dark. I hated dwelling on what happened. The more it played through my mind, the more the guilt ate at me.

"Do you think they will come for Abelon next?" Ervin asked.

"I truly hope not. Because I do not know if we will survive it," I said, honestly.

I NEEDED to clear my head. There was now a ball to prepare for and my wedding. I'd been to a few weddings and knew they were always the most over the top celebrations. Nobles would take any opportunity to dress up and show off to each other.

Balls were not really my specialty either. Already I felt the anxiety and pressure of needing to keep the nobles pleased and convincing Koraine to pledge loyalty to Abelon. If she acted at all like she opposed this kingdom, my father would have her head for it. I couldn't let that happen.

There was also the matter of Luheo to deal with. How was I going to hunt down a spy in our midsts? I couldn't let them continue to operate out of Abelon. It put my people at risk and already cost us so many innocent lives. This would be my first priority after the wedding.

Overwhelmed, I decided a ride on Imry was the best thing for me. Making my way to the platform the palace used for dragons to come and go, I pulled open the heavy door and stepped outside. The sun blinded me for a moment until I was able to fully step into the open air.

I should've invited Koraine to come for a ride. She'd never been on a dragon from what I could tell, but she'd need to get used to them and Imry needed to get familiar with Koraine. I could've used this as a peace offering after what happened. It was too late to turn back now. After we were married, I'd teach Koraine how to ride.

Calling for Imry, I waited patiently for my dragon to come. As I spotted her in the distance, I prepared myself. Imry and I's relationship was not like most riders and their dragon. Most used their dragon as a tool of battle. Training with them, but never seeing them as more than a weapon.

I knew Imry was more than that. She understood me, and I trusted her with my life. It's what I supposed made me one of the best riders in Abelon.

As Imry approached, she made a sharp right. Circling wide, she finally turned, aiming once more for the platform. She was coming from my left side. I waited, making sure not to move too soon. I'd done this many times before, but impatience could kill me.

I needed to wait for the perfect moment.

I could sense Imry was closing in and began running for the edge of the platform. I didn't slow down. Not even as the end of the platform neared. Throwing myself off the edge, I was free falling for a moment. My heart raced as I dropped.

Then I hit a solid mass.

Imry caught me, and I found myself secure on her back. This had become a fun little game for the two of us. I never made her land unless I had to. It was easier to be able to mount her in any situation. It'd be useful in war if Luheo brought a battle to us. A second could make all the difference in saving hundreds of lives.

"Let's head for the sea," I said, urging Imry to aim for the water.

I wanted to be far from the problems of Abelon. Heading further in to the kingdom only reminded me of the state of our lands. It was a depressing and bleak sight to see. At least over the sea, I didn't have to think about it.

As we flew above the waves, the temperature around me cooled. I commanded Imry to aim lower. Having her fly just above the waves, I could feel the mist of the water spraying me.

We continued our journey, traveling in large loops. I pushed Imry to fly further out. The more distance I put between myself and the palace the better. They could survive without me for an hour or two.

As we journeyed further out, I spotted a ship in the distance. It didn't look like any of the merchant ships that sat at the docks. I knew it wasn't any ship from the royal palace either. Were these Luheo scouts?

I pulled Imry back up into the clouds, using them as cover for our approach. If this was Luheo, I needed to know. My father would be pleased if I caught a bunch of Luheo warriors on their way to scout our lands. Maybe it would be enough to improve his mood before the wedding.

Drawing closer to the ship, I could just make out four figures on the wooden vessel below. There were three men, and they were surrounding one woman. As I looked, I almost didn't believe my eyes. I recognized the beautiful white hair and blue clothing I knew she loved to wear.

What was Koraine doing on their ship?

They had her hands bound, and I flinched as I watched one hit her. Imry flew past the ship, and I lost sight of it for a moment. I directed the beast to turn back. I needed to get Koraine off the ship. My heart sped up, and a new urgency filled me. This wasn't Luheo, it was smugglers, and these smugglers had my soon to be wife.

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KORAINE



ragging me to the front of their ship, the smugglers laughed as they tossed me to the ground. My wrists still burned from the pain of the flames they'd used to capture me. I wanted to fight back, but the pain was too much. I hadn't expected it to hurt this badly.

Sending Talay away had been my one sound decision. I didn't want him caught up in this. I knew what price a smuggler could get for a sea serpent, and there was no way I'd let these ones get their hands on mine.

"Come on, girl. Stop struggling," one of the smugglers, who smelt like rotten fish and booze said as he grasped my chin in his hand. He was trying to get a good look at me. Scraggly hair fell into his eyes, as he hovered over me.

Another smuggler, tightened my binds, and the scratchy rope against my skin caused me to cry out, my burns aching even more. I tugged, trying to separate my hands, but the rope had no give to them.

What did they want with me?

"You'll regret this," I tried to spat at them, while holding back tears. "The prince will come for me," I tried to muster enough strength to sound convincing. I was failing miserably. Tears started sliding down my cheeks.

All three smugglers laughed at me. One grabbed me, flipping me over to face them.

"You hear that, men? She doesn't even know that Morwen doesn't have a prince!" I should've known they'd assume I was from Morwen by my appearance alone. Why would they think I was coming from Abelon?

"The prince of Abelon," I growled, causing them to laugh even more.

"You know what I think?" one pondered to the others. "I think we've caught a spy. Were you trying to enter Abelon unnoticed? Well, I have news for you, pretty. You won't be going anywhere near Abelon now," he sneered.

I was completely soaked, and my body was beginning to shiver. His words filled me with dread. If I didn't warm soon, I'd be in serious trouble. My drenched hair clung to my face. One of the smugglers lifted a piece of my hair into his hands.

"I wonder what pretty price this would get," the smuggler thought out loud through his rotting teeth. This made the other two men on board cackle. "I bet I could sell it for a whole sack of gold. Long vibrant hair like that is hard to come by."

I spit in his face, causing him to stumble back. I may not have use of my hands, but I wasn't going to tolerate this disgusting taunting any longer. The smuggler turned irate. Slapping me, he slammed me back into the wood of the deck.

"Be an obedient little bitch," he taunted.

My face burned, and I knew my cheek would bruise tomorrow. If I even got a tomorrow now. These smugglers were impatient, they didn't have time to deal with a difficult woman making their lives harder. I knew my only chance of escape was to upset them. Get them to make a mistake.

"What, did I hurt your fragile ego?" I asked, making an over the top, dramatic frown at the smuggler.

Kicking me in the gut, I winced as his foot connected with my body. The bruise I knew I'd find later would span my entire stomach. Already I could feel the ache his assault had caused.

"That'll shut you up," he taunted.

I wanted to escape, but I didn't want to end up dead. I was toeing a very fine line. If I kept pushing them, they may snap and just kill me. Glancing around, I tried to spot anything I could use to help me. If I could get my wrists and ankles untied, then maybe I could manipulate water enough to get off this ship. I would swim back to Abelon if I had to.

On the side of the ship near me, I spotted a knife that looked like it was used for fishing. It hung on a small hook attached to the rail of the ship. I'd bide my time and wait until I could slide myself over to the railing. Then maybe I could use it to cut this rope.

The smugglers stood around, making jokes about the different ways they'd use me. None of their remarks surprised me. They'd sell me to the highest bidder, but not before they had their fun with me. I'd throw myself overboard before I let that happen.

Soon they grew bored with me and returned to manning the ship, occasionally glancing my way. It was a small wooden ship compared to most war ships or ones for traveling, and it didn't take many men to get it sailing. We hadn't moved far from where they'd captured me, but I could tell they were ready to move on. And it wasn't toward Abelon. I needed to act fast.

Sliding over to the edge of the ship, I sat myself against the side. None of the men noticed. From where they each stood, it would just appear I wanted to prop myself up against the side of the ship.

I managed to wiggle the ropes on my ankles looser, and soon I had enough slack to slip my foot out. My shoulder was next to the knife, and I tried to nudge it off the hook. After a few attempts, it clattered to the ground. My heart sunk, the noise louder than I expected it to be.

Glancing up, I found the smuggler closest to me staring. He'd heard the drop of the knife. From the look on his face, I knew I was doomed. I'd missed my chance.

Walking over, he picked up the knife glancing it over.

"Did you think this would help you?" he asked. "I have news for you, girl. Your life belongs to us now. There is no person or knife who will save you now. If we want to fuck you, then we will, If we want to sell you, then you will sit there pretty and fetch us the best price you can."

Grabbing my arm, he forced me up. Pushing me against the railing, he stroked my cheek with his calloused hand. I'd had enough of this treatment. I jabbed my knee as hard as I could into his groin. The smuggler doubled over in pain.

"I belong to no one," I spat at him, kicking him while he was hunched. My foot ached after connecting with the solid mass of his body.

Another smuggler ran over, grabbing me. I squirmed and kicked, trying to free myself of his grasp. One of his hands covered my mouth, and I bit down as hard as I could on his skin, drawing blood.

"Shit," he cursed, letting go for a moment.

I took my chance and ran for the edge of the ship. If I jumped the railing could I make it back to Abelon? I didn't like my chances with my hands

still tied. I couldn't control the choppy water beneath me without access to them. The third smuggler caught up to me and pulled me back from the edge.

"Water whore," the smuggler spat.

A movement past me seemed to catch his attention.

"Shit," he said to the others. "She's not worth ending up in the king's cells for."

"Get rid of her before they see her," another urged.

"See if you like the water so much now," the one I had kicked taunted.

Before I could question what he meant, he grabbed me and punched me in the face. Shoving me hard over the side of the ship, my vision was blurry and I was disoriented as I fell. With my wrists bound so tightly, I couldn't brace myself for the impact with the sea. The cold water slammed into my face, and I began sinking. I tried hard to kick and stay above the waves, but it was useless. Without my hands, I had no way to control the water.

I knew the harder I struggled against my binds, the faster I would sink. I'd run out of air quickly if I kept squirming, but there was no other option. Trying to kick to the surface, the rough sea kept pulling me back down. Part of me wished Talay would come, but from under the water I couldn't call out to him.

I was going to die in the one place I should feel safest. What a cruel fate.

I let myself close my eyes, accepting that there was nothing more I could do. With no hands, I was useless in the water. The sea was too strong to fight. My head pounded from the hit I'd taken and my vision was still blurry, made worse by the water.

I knew what my father would say if he saw me now. He'd think I was weak. A failure at everything he'd taught me. The man had spent hours teaching my brothers and I how to get out of any situation. The biggest lesson was to never stop fighting.

Maybe he'd been right to send me away? I was weak. What purpose did I possibly have in life besides being used as a tool of negotiations between

kingdoms? This entire time, I'd held so much fury in my heart toward him for what he'd agreed to. Now I wasn't so sure he'd made the worst decision.

Sinking, I let myself slip away.

Flashes of my family played through my mind. I'd never make it back to Morwen to see them. What would they think happened to me? Would they assume the Abelonians killed me? That my death was made to look like some big accident?

The consequences of my death could mean the end of peace for my kingdom. If the king didn't think Abelon upheld its end of the negotiations, would he declare war?

How could I have been so stupid? I never should've wandered this far from Abelon. I would be the reason my people suffered now. I couldn't just sit put and wait to be married. I had to visit the sea, and now it would doom my own people.

With one last flutter of my eyes, I saw the reflection of the sun on the water's surface slowly disappear as I closed my eyes one last time.

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BELLAMY



ithout thinking, I dove into the water. There was no time to consider the consequences. With her arms bound behind her, Koraine was going to drown. I flung myself from Imry's back, heading straight for the vast water below.

I wasn't a strong swimmer, but I'd been forced to learn as a child. That was the last time I'd put myself in water like this.

As the cold sea hit my face, my instincts took over. It was dark underneath the surface, and I struggled to see Koraine. A slight movement of white caught my eye and I knew it was her. Swimming down toward it, I tried not to think about the water I was in. If I let myself think about it, I'd panic, and we'd both die out here.

I pushed harder and harder, trying to catch up to her slowly sinking body. I cursed as I saw her eyes weren't open.

With one last strong push, I reached out, grabbing her. I pulled her close to me and began kicking toward the surface. The water kept trying to pull us back down. With every kick and push toward the surface, I found myself growing more and more tired. Would I be able to keep this up much longer?

Sunlight danced on the surface of the water. It was so close, I just had to keep working.

Finally breaking the surface of the water, I coughed as I dragged Koraine's head above the waves. Panic was starting to settle in the reality of what I had done. I was in the water. And not just any water. An entire sea of it.

Spotting Imry, I called the dragon closer. Holding tight to Koraine, I let the dragon grab hold of me with her talons. Carrying us, I directed the beast to land on the ship I'd seen Koraine tossed from.

The three men aboard scrambled as we approached. Infuriated, I retrained my focus. Landing, I ignored the men and immediately lifted Koraine onto Imry's back.

With Koraine safe on Imry, I turned my attention to the smugglers. Their eyes instantly widened, recognizing who I was.

"And what do we have here," I drawled. My temper was growing, and I had no patience to hear their sorry excuses.

"My prince, we thought she was a traitor," one of the smugglers started.

I knew how this would go. They would claim they were merely fishermen working out here. It was the same ploy most smugglers used in this part of the sea. They'd tell me they found a Morwenian and decided to take matters into their own hands to protect Abelon.

It was all dragon shit.

"So you weren't about to transport her to sell in the illegal market I know operates out of Zetron?"

The most notorious market of illegal items was set up in the heart of the earth kingdom. I'd never been, but I'd heard the stories of the horrifying items sold there. The auctions held to sell people to the highest bidders as their slaves. I suspected a few of the workers in the noble families' homes had come from such auctions.

"No, my prince," one of the smugglers said warily.

"So when she wakes, she won't tell me another story?" I asked, raising my eyebrow.

"She's a Morwenian they lie!" one of the smugglers shouted.

"Ah," I drawled. "So the truth comes out." I stalked closer to the men, watching as they stiffened. "She's the future queen of Abelon. I won't ask you again. Were you about to transport her to Zetron?"

"Yes," one of the smugglers admitted. The other two glared in his direction.

"For your honesty I will show you mercy," I said.

"Thank you! Thank you, my prince," he said hurriedly. He wouldn't be thanking me if he knew what that mercy looked like.

"Imry," I said. Her name was enough for her to know, our connection running deep.

The intense heat of her flames brushed my skin as it flew past me. The dragon incinerated the man where he stood, leaving behind barely a

remnant of a person. The other two smugglers were shaking, unable to meet the eyes of my beast. They knew they were in for far worse.

One ran for the ship's edge, but before they could make it, I sent my flames flying. I set the entire railing ablaze. The intensity of the heat stopping him in his tracks. Before he could use his own abilities, I acted.

"Imry," I commanded again. "Burn the ship."

Even if the men were able to survive the flames, controlling them long enough to jump ship, they wouldn't survive the sea long.

Jumping on Imry's back, I urged her to take off. Grabbing Koraine, I held her tight to my chest. She still hadn't opened her eyes yet. The ship began burning fast. By the time we were in the sky the entire ship was ablaze, sinking.

I didn't spare a second glance. The smugglers deserved the fate they received.

As Imry ascended into the sky, Koraine's eyes began to flutter open.

"Koraine?" I asked, gently.

Her head turned to me, those beautiful blue eyes meeting my own.

"What happened?" she asked, her voice groggy. She coughed, a bit of water escaping from her lips.

She'd almost drowned. One of the strongest people I'd ever met, and the water had almost taken her from me. She'd been stripped down to powerless. Unable to access her abilities.

"You were thrown off the ship and passed out," I explained gently.

Her eyes widened with horror. I saw as panic took over and felt her tense in my arms.

"The smugglers," she said, trying to sit up on her own, unaware she was on Imry. I felt her heart rate pick up in speed as she glanced around. She grabbed on to me tightly, clinging to my soaked shirt.

"I took care of them," I assured her. "They'll never be able to harm you again."

The last part was a promise, as much as a threat. I'd kill anyone who laid a hand on her. She was to be my queen and I would protect her as such. Confused, she glanced over my shoulder at where we had just come from. There was smoke rising into the sky, but the boat was already gone. Koraine didn't ask, but I knew she could guess what had taken place. Instead, she rested her head against my chest.

I was using one hand to steady myself on Imry and the other to hold her. Imry lifted us into the clouds, heading back to the palace.

"Shit," Koraine whispered as Imry flew higher.

I could feel her body tremble against mine as Imry soared well above the sea. Slowly, I slid my hand to her thigh. Her cold skin was exposed where her skirt ripped in her struggle. Lazily, my thumb ran circles across it. I could feel her start to settle a little as she focused on my touch.

The trembling slowed, and Koraine leaned back into me a bit more. Trusting me to take her safely home. Her muscles were still tense, and I knew that anyone else would react the same way their first time flying. I'd been terrified the first time I went for a ride on Imry.

"I'm right here," I whispered, trying to comfort her. I wasn't sure if it would help, but I needed her to know I wouldn't let her go anywhere. Instinctively, I wanted to protect her. Keep her safe.

She was to be my wife. But was it becoming more than just that? I still hadn't processed my feelings, but I couldn't ignore the way my heart had sunk when I saw her drowning. I never wanted to let her go again.

I didn't have time to think about it, I needed to focus on getting her back to the palace. If she didn't warm soon, illness would consume her body. I had to get her back and find Nyla.

"I told them you'd come," she whispered weakly. Her words trailed off, and she passed out again.

WW

IMRY LANDED on the palace platform, bending to allow me to climb off. I carried Koraine in my arms, hugging her tightly to my body. Hurrying through the palace halls, I made my way to our chambers. I'd bring her back to her room and find my sister.

A trail of water was left behind, as water dripped from both of us. If I wasn't careful, I could fall ill just as easily. I needed to get my clothing off, and fast.

As we approached our shared chambers I spotted a guard.

"No one disrupts us or enters our chambers the rest of the night," I ordered. The guard gave me a firm nod. If he wondered what happened to Koraine, he didn't voice it.

Rushing inside the chambers, I gently lowered Koraine into her bed. Immediately, her eyes fluttered open again. She hazily looked around the room, recognizing where she was.

"You got us back?" she asked, shakily.

"Of course I did," I answered, finding her bright blue eyes watching me.

Sitting on the bed next to her, I ran my hand along her cheek. Her skin was freezing, and she'd started shaking again. Not only did she need warm clothing, but warm food and drink wouldn't hurt either.

I'd locate Nyla, and find food to bring back.

"I have to go find my sister, will you be alright for a few minutes?" I asked.

She weakly tried to sit up. Helping her, I let her rest against my body as she gained her balance.

"I need to change out of these clothes," she said weakly, through chattering teeth.

"Do you want help?" I asked.

My cheeks warmed a little. I'd assumed she'd want Nyla's help to change out of the soaked clothing, especially after everything that had happened between us. Now I felt a bit foolish for not offering sooner. Koraine's life was at risk.

"I'm okay, I can do it," she said, slowly rising from the bed.

"Koraine you need rest," I said, worried she might fall back over. "Let me help."

"I'll lay right back down after I change I promise," she assured me.

Skeptically, I trusted her. I really needed to get moving and find Nyla. The sooner I found my sister, the better. I needed someone to help Koraine while I found warm food and changed my own clothing.

"I'll be back," I promised. "I'm going to get Nyla."

I HATED LEAVING Koraine how she was. It pained me to see her in such a confused state. I'd noticed her wrists had burn marks along with the rope marks that marred her skin. The fate the smugglers had met was a mercy compared to the torture I wished they'd endured for touching her.

Why had she been out so far alone?

I knew she visited her sea serpent sometimes, but the part of the sea she had ventured into was open water known to be dangerous.

I'd been so wrapped up in my own head, I hadn't even paused to consider whether Koraine was alright. She'd already been through an ordeal with Cyrus. Had she gone out that far to escape for a while and clear her head? I should've checked on her. Instead, I avoided her like the coward I was.

I picked up my pace, almost running through the halls. Nyla's chambers were not far from my own. When I made it to her door, I knocked desperate for her to answer. After pounding my fist on the door for a minute, I almost gave up. Her wooden door cracked open, and she poked her head out.

"What do you want?" she asked, rubbing sleep from her eyes. "I was napping, Bellamy!"

"It's Koraine!" I explained.

There wasn't time to waste. I needed Nyla to just go, so I could hurry to the kitchen.

"I'm going!" she exclaimed, her eyes wide with panic.

She slipped past me, rushing off in the direction of Koraine's room. The kitchen was in the opposite direction. I quickly made my way down, finding it alive with cooks preparing food. I spotted a pot of stew in the corner. Grabbing a bowl, I filled it with the hot meal. Luckily, the stew had finished cooking for dinner. It would have to be enough.

Carrying the stew, careful not to spill any I made my way back to Koraine.

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KORAINE



s soon as Bellamy left, I sunk to the floor, unable to hold myself up. My body was weak, and my legs didn't have the strength to stand. Tears streaked my cheeks as overwhelming emotions filled me. I'd almost died.

"Why are you sopping wet?" Nyla asked me, horrified, as she entered my room. She'd crashed through my door so quickly it had startled me.

"Smugglers," I said through chattering teeth. I was freezing and shivering out of control. I didn't have the energy to explain any further to her.

"We need to get you warm!" she exclaimed, already opening my wardrobe.

She found a pair of warm black pants and a red long sleeve top. Helping me out of my drenched clothing, Nyla pulled the new clothes over my shivering body. She was slow and careful, the way a mother would be with her child. I wondered if this was what the queen had been like.

A loud bang came from Bellamy's room as his door slammed shut behind him.

"I'm going to get Bellamy," Nyla said, and I could hear the worry hidden behind each word. "I can't carry you myself to the fireplace."

I sat on the floor as Nyla hurried from the room. It felt like ages before she came back, in reality it was only a minute or two. She returned, the prince trailing in behind her. He now had on dry clothing, and the pair were bickering.

"She was supposed to be just changing into warmer clothes," he said.

"Does she look like she can do that? She's in shock!" Nyla shouted. "She needs to warm up or her heart is going to start to fail her."

Bellamy's cheeks reddened. I knew he'd needed to get out of the soaking wet clothes too, but Nyla still scolded him like a child for not coming back faster.

Already I could feel the effects of the cold. My shaking was out of control. No matter how hard I tried to focus, I couldn't. Nyla and Bellamy's words were fading. It was like my mind was slowly slipping from me. Toppling over, my body hit the cold, tiled floor.

Strong arms lifted me, carrying me. My eyelids fluttered. I was so tired, and just wanted to drift off to sleep.

"Koraine," Bellamy's worried voice said. "Keep your eyes open, Koraine," he pleaded.

Why did he sound so worried? I just needed to sleep this off, and I'd wake up much better. Exhaustion was setting in and as soon as I curled up under my warm sheets I would be okay.

I tried to keep my eyes from closing like he asked, but they felt too heavy to hold up. Through a hazy blink, I recognized Bellamy's room. On one wall there was a fireplace, which Nyla was now manipulating her own flames to fill. Bellamy carefully set me down next to the fire, cradling me close to his chest.

He was the embodiment of flames, his skin so warm against my own icy cheeks. His fingers tangled in the strands of my hair, as he stroked my head, trying to calm me.

"Grab that blanket," he ordered Nyla.

She hurriedly grabbed a blanket from his bed, bringing it over. They worked together to drape the large blanket around me. It was plush and thick. The warmth immediately helped with the shaking.

Bellamy's strong arms wrapped around me, moving up and down in an attempt to help raise my body temperature. Nyla watched, concerned with her arms crossed. Spotting something behind us, she moved to grab it. Coming back, she carried a bowl.

"Here, Bellamy brought back warm stew. This should help build your strength again," she said, gently.

Bellamy loosened his grip on me, enough that I could move my arms to grab the bowl and spoon. I had a feeling part of his grasp had nothing to do with wanting to warm me. He'd seemed on edge and frantic since he rescued me. I didn't quite understand fully why, but I could tell my brush with death scared him.

"Thank you," I said, weakly to them both.

There was nothing that I'd be able to do to ever repay them. Bellamy had dove into the sea to save me from drowning. That had to mean something. Maybe I'd been wrong about how he felt, but that didn't matter right now. I needed to focus on resting and allowing my body to heal. There would be time to contemplate my complicated relationship with the prince later once I was better.

I finished the stew and felt my eyelids growing heavier again. This time it was the genuine exhaustion. Neither Nyla nor Bellamy's gaze had left me in minutes. They watched vigilantly, like I may disappear any moment.

"I promise I'm alright," I managed to say, with a small chuckle. I gave them both a weak smile.

"I swear, Koraine," Nyla started. "You gave me a heart attack. What were you doing out there?"

"I was going for a ride on Talay. Getting some air," I said. Suddenly panic filled me as I remembered Talay hit with flames. Trying to squirm away from the prince, I attempted to push myself to stand. My body wasn't ready just yet, and I immediately sunk back down. "Talay," I started, worry in my voice.

Both Bellamy and Nyla glanced at each other, and the latter gave a small nod.

"I'll find him," Nyla assured me. "I'll take Veros now."

"You would do that for me?" I asked, shocked. The gesture was no small thing to me. Talay meant everything to me, and Nyla's willingness to check on him meant the world.

"You're family now, Koraine. I will always look out for family," she said. Bending down, she gave me a quick hug, and I let her. "I'll let you know the minute I find him."

The princess hurried off from the room, leaving me alone with Bellamy. He hadn't spoken much to me since he'd carried me to the room, but he also hadn't taken his eyes off me. I could feel his dark gaze settled on the back of my head. He was still sitting close to me on the floor. I didn't want to leave the warmth of the fire, but again I found myself unable to keep my eyes open.

"I'm so tired," I whispered.

Without a word, the prince stood and hovered behind me. Slowly, he bent down and scooped me once more into his arms. Carrying me over to his bed, he placed me gently on one side. I quickly found myself tucked under the soft sheets. I was about to tell him he could've taken me back to my room when he stopped me.

"Don't even try to argue. I'm not taking my eyes off you until I know you are well and safe," Bellamy said in a low tone.

I gave him a simple nod in return. If I was being honest, I was too tired to argue with him. As my eyes finally shut, I rolled over in the bed and let myself drift off into a deep sleep.

I was back under the water once more. The darkness beneath me was rapidly approaching, and no matter what I did I couldn't move. I was frozen in place. I couldn't escape the fate coming to claim my life.

Struggling against the pull of the sea, I felt the air slowly leaving my lungs. Soon I'd run out of air, and wouldn't be able to take another breath.

The promise of death terrified me. I wasn't ready to give up so easily. I tried to push myself up toward the light above me, but some invisible force kept pulling me back down. My arms struggled to swim, and my legs felts paralyzed. Even though I had my abilities and my arms and legs were free, nothing was working. That unseen force just wouldn't loosen its grasp.

As I sunk further into the water, my lungs felt like they were on fire. Any moment and I would have to give in. My vision was beginning to turn black in the corners and I knew my time was up.

Opening my mouth for a breath that wouldn't come, I let out a silent scream. The bubbles trailing up from my mouth to the sun I may never see again.

I SAT UP, unaware of where I was. My skin was covered in cold beads of sweat and I was struggling to catch my breath. Beside me, the prince sat up, wide eyed. He glanced around the room panicked.

"What's wrong?" he asked quickly, lighting a fire in his palm. He looked ready to burn the entire room down.

"I think it was just a dream," I panted through labored breaths.

Immediately extinguishing the flame he turned to me, realizing there was no real threat. He searched my face, worry written across his own. I placed a hand on my chest trying to calm myself, but the dream had felt so realistic. I'd been right back beneath the waves, drowning again.

Bellamy stared at me with those dark eyes that promised so much. I shied away from his gaze, far too aware of the disturbance I'd caused.

"Come here," Bellamy said, in a gentle tone I hadn't heard before.

He reached out, wrapping me in his strong arms. Pulling me in close, he settled back down in bed. I rested on his chest, feeling the rise and fall of his breath. It was much calmer than my own.

"Nyla found Talay. She came back shortly after you drifted off," Bellamy said in a comforting tone. Relief washed over me knowing my serpent was safe.

"Thank you," I whispered.

His hand lazily stroked my shoulder, his thumb rubbing circles on my skin.

"Why'd you dive in after me?" I asked, unsure I truly wanted to know the answer.

"I wasn't going to let you drown," he said, like it was so simple. Maybe it was that simple for him.

I knew how he felt about water. I'd seen the way he avoided even the small garden pool. After he'd lashed at me for splashing him, I figured it out. He feared the water.

I didn't push, guarding my heart from what I may hear if I did.

"Is that what you were dreaming about?" Bellamy asked.

"Yes," I whispered. "I was right back under the waves, but this time was different. This time, even with my hands unbound, the sea still pulled me down and wouldn't loosen its grip on me. I felt like I was going to die under there."

The shame I felt admitting that last part plagued me. The water was supposed to be the one place I felt safe, and it was taken from me. It would take time before I felt comfortable wandering that far into the sea again.

"I just don't know how I'll go back out there again," I admitted, trailing off at the end.

"You can conquer this, these feelings are only temporary," Bellamy reminded me.

I'd heard him say this once before. He was right, this feeling would pass someday, but it would take a lot of work and wouldn't be easy. I'd need to work tirelessly with Talay to feel safe riding out in the sea again.

Before I could do that, I needed to conquer the feelings that plagued me. If I couldn't face my fears and open my heart to potentially be broken, how would I ever regain control over my power and self?

"Why did you leave?" I asked timidly.

I knew I shouldn't pry, but I had to know for certain. If the prince had no feelings for me, then I would accept that and move on. There were plenty of rulers who married for power and not love. If I had to be one of them, at least I knew it was to protect the people of Morwen.

Bellamy remained silent. I could tell by the way his heart picked up in a speed against my head, that he'd heard the question.

"Please, Bellamy," I whispered. "I need to know."

My life had felt like it was spiraling. I deserved answers. I may never be able to punish Cyrus for what he did, or feel completely safe in the water again, but this was something I could control. I got to choose to open my heart to Bellamy.

I knew from the moment I saw him at the orphanage that he wasn't the cruel ruler the world saw him as. Our kingdoms had been enemies for too long. It was finally time to end that.

"Because I can't do that to you," Bellamy said.

It wasn't his choice to make. Why didn't he understand that? I was the one choosing to allow myself to finally feel these emotions. I came to Abelon with so much hatred in my heart, and I no longer wanted to feel that way.

"You're not, I'm choosing to do this too," I said. The way we were cuddled up together I couldn't move to read his face. "I want this, Bellamy. I want you. I've seen what type of prince you are. You care for these people, and you care enough about me to look after me. I thought a part of you wanted this too."

"You're wrong," Bellamy said. "This can't be, our marriage is to save our kingdoms. I never wanted this, but I'll do what I must as prince. If I let myself feel more than that, people will end up hurt. My duty will always be to the people of Abelon, Koraine. I need you to understand that. I don't get to be selfish. I don't get to feel what I want, or give in to my desires."

I could tell the words pained him to say. As they left his mouth, I could sense his confidence behind them waning. I understood what he meant about his duty to his people. I had the same one to fulfill, but it wasn't fair to close our hearts off entirely because of it. I didn't believe he truly wanted that.

"Bellamy-" I began.

"Koraine, please. Don't make this harder than it has to be," he said his tone full of sorrow. "You need more rest, try to get some sleep."

That was the end of his willingness to discuss. I knew that if I tried to push more, he'd only shut me out further. Part of me wanted to run away. I could return to my own room, but somehow that didn't feel far enough to hide from the way my heart ached. The other part of me was selfish. It wanted to remain in this moment, allowing Bellamy to hold me one more time before he pushed me away again.

For once, I chose to be selfish. I let myself settle into the warmth of his hold. His strong arms held tight to my body. I knew he also selfishly didn't want to let go. We had this one night to remain in a bubble of our own. One without expectations and demands, and one where we could give in to our wants and desires and just be free for a moment in time.

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BELLAMY



couldn't sleep the rest of the night. After Koraine woke from her nightmare, I felt protective. I knew it was wrong. I had just told her I couldn't care for her in that way, but I needed to know she was alright.

Through the night, I watched as she slept peacefully on my chest. Letting her have all of me would only put her in more danger. Already my father kept a watchful eye on her. If he thought I genuinely cared for Koraine, he would use her as a tool to manipulate me. She was in danger just existing in Abelon. I wouldn't make that worse for her.

If I didn't convince my father I had control over her there would be no wedding at all. I needed to be completely focused on convincing my father she was a valuable asset to us. Just caring for her wouldn't be enough to protect her from him.

I didn't want to burden her with this. Instead, I closed myself off to her. I tried to make it clear that we had to go through with this marriage for the sake of our kingdoms not our hearts. Even if I didn't believe the words as I said them, it was what was best.

I couldn't stand to lose anyone else I cared for. It was easier to shut her out, keep her at a distance until this was over, if it ever did end. Would marriage be enough to satisfy my father and his plans? How long until I knew Koraine was safe from his wrath? I couldn't protect her if my judgement was clouded by emotion.

As the morning light crept through my window, I dreaded the moment Koraine's eyes fluttered open. She'd go back to preparing for the ball and wedding, and I'd go back to carrying out my duties. No longer would we be in our own little world here.

After another few minutes and she finally stirred. Sitting up, she rubbed the sleep from her eyes. Even after just waking up she still looked stunning. Her peaceful blue eyes met mine, and I felt lost in them for a second.

Without a word, she climbed out of my arms, sliding across the bed. The way her clothing clung to her highlighted every curve of her body as she stood. Her white hair fell in waves down her back. It had dried untamed from being drenched in the sea, but it made her look even more divine.

"Koraine," I started, but she held up a hand.

"There's no need. I understand," she said her features turning somber. "I'll see you at the ball."

Without another word, she left the room for her own. I wanted to call out to her. Beg her to stay even just a moment longer, but I knew I couldn't.

THE BALL WAS ONLY a day away now, and I had preparations I needed to make. Wandering through the halls of the palace, I searched for my sister. I wanted to let her know Koraine recovered, and also recruit her to help with finding me an outfit for the approaching event.

I didn't often attend balls, and I'd be expected to match Koraine. It was a tradition for couples to match.

I only hoped Koraine didn't insist on wearing the blue tones she wore daily still. My father would have both our heads if we showed up at the ball in Morwen's traditional colors.

Rounding a corner, I had to act quick on my feet to avoid slamming in to a small group of guards. At the forefront of the group was the very last person I wished to see. Immediately, all the fury and frustration I felt rose to the surface.

"Cyrus," I growled.

A look of amusement crossed his face. I recognized the three other guards with him as ones who were particularly loyal to the captain.

"Prince, what a lovely surprise," Cyrus drawled. "I would've thought you'd be spending time with Koraine. Where is your lovely wife to be? Did she grow tired of you yet?" he asked in a tauntingly.

"Do not let me hear her name on your tongue again," I growled.

I knew he was provoking me and it was working. My flames begged for release. The king wouldn't be pleased if I incinerated his captain of the guard, but it may be worth the risk and punishment.

I tried to move past Cyrus and ignore him. If I could find Nyla, it'd be a welcomed distraction. The muscular guard stepped in my path, blocking me. The wicked grin on his face had me clenching my fists. Cyrus was looking for a fight.

"I don't think we quite finished our discussion the other night," he said. "And now you're hurrying off. What's the rush?

He'd run off like a coward before, but now in front of his guards he was trying to act tough.

"You know what you're right. Let's settle this," I said a slow grin now curling my lips. Any fear I had of what my father would do to me for harming Cyrus left my mind.

Cyrus was taken aback, glancing nervously at the other guards. If he wasn't going to leave Koraine alone, I'd have to make sure I taught him a lesson he finally understood.

"Training courtyard," I stated. "We settle this properly."

Shoving past him, I headed in the direction of the training yard. I didn't care if he followed or not. If he didn't, word would spread from just those three guards, and no one would respect him anymore, and if he did follow I'd beat him in a challenge and take care of this issue once and for all.

I stood at one end of the courtyard, waiting for Cyrus to arrive. After a moment, he finally stepped outside, followed by the same three guards. Removing pieces of his uniform, he stripped off his shirt, flexing his muscles with each movement.

Showing off wouldn't save him from what I had planned.

"First to yield loses," I shouted across the space.

"And if I refuse to yield?" he asked.

"Then you die," I said under my breath before making the first move.

Throwing a strike of flames in his direction, I rushed into the fight. Cyrus easily dodged, as I expected he would. This wouldn't be a quick win. One didn't become captain of the guard without some skill.

Cyrus sent a stream of flames right back at me, and I rolled to dodge it last second. We continued on like this, our flames a display of power and strength. The longer we continued, the more people gathered to watch. I noticed out of the corner of my eye a small crowd of guards and palace workers drawn outside.

Moving in closer, our strikes became more precise. A mix of flames and punches, I danced my way around the courtyard trying to land the final blow. I was exhausted from the little sleep I'd gotten, but I didn't let that hold me back. Every time I felt tired, I just remembered the image of Cyrus pinning Koraine to the wall, and my flames grew even stronger.

As I threw a punch, my fist covered in flames, Cyrus caught it, throwing me to the ground. My knees scrapped the dirt surface, and I turned in time to dodge him coming for me again. As he narrowly missed, I kicked out my leg hard enough to knock him to the ground.

Jumping on top of him, I pinned him.

"Yield!" I demanded, every gaze in the courtyard fell on us. No one dared to make a sound.

"Never," he spat in my face.

"Don't make me do this. Yield!"

"You wouldn't, you're too much of a coward," he taunted with a laugh.

I let go of one of his arms, putting my hand around his neck. My grip tight, I slowly began to call a flame to my palm. I started it small. Just enough to leave a tiny burn mark. Then I let it grow, the burning creeping across his skin. Cyrus writhed under my grip, trying to get me off, but I didn't budge.

I would kill him for what he did to Koraine. He was a thorn in my side, and I wanted him gone. Lost in my thoughts, I didn't hear the crowd's gasp when my father entered the courtyard.

"Enough," the king's voice bellowed through the space.

I looked up, finding my father standing above me. His glare was enough to tell me he wasn't pleased. I stood up, releasing Cyrus from my grip. He had red welts already forming on his neck. The burns would leave a nasty mark.

Cyrus hurried off before the king could change his mind. My father turned his back on me, striding off. I was sure I'd hear about this later, but there was nothing the king could do in front of all of these guards and workers. I'd just undermined his captain, and I knew he wouldn't let that just slip by.

As I watched him leave, another familiar face caught my eye. Koraine was standing with Nyla, watching. My gaze settled on Koraine's, and a pit

formed in my stomach as I saw the look of horror on her face. She slipped back in to the crowd, disappearing into the palace.

I thought she would've been glad. Cyrus finally got what he deserved. Instead, she looked just as disappointed in me as she had him.

Letting my control slip, I released flames from my hands and let them roar into the sky above me, yelling out in frustration. This quickly dispersed the remaining crowd in the courtyard. As the last of the observers left, I fell to my knees. My head in my hands, I knew my temper would be my downfall. The fire inside me demanded to be used and urged me toward destruction. Ruining all I'd worked so hard to preserve.

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KORAINE



fter spending the day shopping for dresses with Nyla, I was exhausted. The last thing I'd expected to return to was a fight. Palace workers and guards were rushing around in panic. Nyla and I gave each other a glance and followed. Finding the source of the commotion, I was surprised to find Bellamy and Cyrus engaged in an all out battle of flames.

I watched horrified as they continued their fight for what felt like an eternity. When Cyrus finally knocked over Bellamy, Nyla grabbed my hand. She was squeezing it tightly, her eyes glued to the men. I couldn't tear my eyes from the scene either. The prince was on his knees, Cyrus hovering above him. At the last second, the prince dodged, tripping Cyrus in the process.

He wasted no time climbing on top of the captain, pinning him.

I watched in disbelief as his hand found Cyrus's neck and began burning him. The torture was brutal and efficient. My stomach sunk as the captain writhed beneath him. Even for what he'd done to me, he didn't deserve this. No one did.

"I can't watch," I whispered to Nyla. "Why is no one stopping them?"

"Who's going to defy the prince? Especially as they are witnessing Cyrus being punished for doing so."

She had a point.

A few people pressed against me as they parted to let someone through. Bumping into the princess, I dropped her hand. I was about to scold the person next to me when I saw who was walking through the crowd. The

king of Abelon made his way into the courtyard. His face was a fiery shade of red, his eyes promising punishment.

"Enough!" he bellowed, causing the prince to finally loosen his grip on Cyrus.

As fast as he'd come, the king left. Without a word, he left Bellamy standing there staring blankly after him. My eyes remained glued to the prince. Slowly, he met my stare as his father disappeared from sight.

The way his eyes bore into me, like he was trying to tell me something pulled at my heart. I didn't want to believe he'd done this for me. I never asked for this, but the moment our eyes locked I knew. Bellamy would've killed Cyrus for laying a hand on me had no one stopped him.

Disappointment overwhelmed me, and guilt followed closely behind. I would never escape the guilt that came with knowing Bellamy had done this to Cyrus for me. Every time I was forced to look at the burn that would now mar the captain's neck, I would know it was my fault. Even if he deserved it, the thought weighed heavy on my chest.

Dipping my head, I turned quickly into the crowd. I let the people sweep me away, escaping from the prince's watchful stare. I needed to place distance between us before the ball. There was only one day before I'd be forced to face him again.

On my way in, I passed a familiar face. Ervin stood inside the entry to the palace. He had a bit of flour smudged on his forehead like he'd forgotten to wipe his hands before coming to see the commotion. Only a few feet separated us and I paused. I could tell he wanted to say something to me, but I shook my head. I didn't want to hear it.

What I needed was a good rest and bath before the elaborate celebration I knew awaited me after one more night's sleep.

Getting ready for an extravagant ball was never something I imagined I would be doing, but here I was painting my eyelids a pale shade of gold. My long locks of hair were pulled back from my face by two thin braids, a maroon bead woven into the base of each braid. The rest of my hair tumbled in loose curls down my back.

I'd agreed to let Nyla help me pick an outfit for the ball after she'd insisted. It was time that I finally start filling my role as future princess consort and someday queen consort. The mainly black dress flowed into shades of maroon at the bottom of the skirt. I wasn't used to wearing these colors, but as I glanced in my mirror, I found they looked almost natural on me.

Nyla obsessed over every last detail. She had me try on multiple pieces of jewelry and tiaras as accessories. I settled for a beautiful gold statement necklace that had tiny black gems added to it. None of the tiaras I tried on sat naturally on my head, and I decided I'd be better off not wearing any. Instead, I found golden clips to pin the braids in the back of my head.

Turning, I helped Nyla tie the corset of her dress. It was a completely gold dress, decorated with sparkles. It was over the top and fit only for the princess of the fire kingdom. Her tiara sat perfectly atop her long red hair.

"Are you ready? Tonight is all about you and Bellamy and your love for this kingdom," she asked. I thought about the passion I had for my own people. Would I grow to have that same love for Abelon?

"I honestly don't know," I admitted. "At the start of summer, I never imagined I'd be getting married come autumn. Now tomorrow I'll marry your brother and be expected to unite our kingdoms. That's no small responsibility."

"You're going to do amazing. Our kingdom will grow to love you the way I have," Nyla said encouragingly.

Throwing my arms around the princess, I wrapped her in a hug. I didn't care about etiquette or what kingdom her loyalties belonged to in this moment. Nyla had grown to be my friend, and I was thankful for the support she provided me.

Surprised by my sudden affection, Nyla hesitated before wrapping her arms tightly around me. The scent of vanilla and jasmine filled my nose. I wasn't the only one to indulge in the oils provided in the bathing chambers.

"Just promise me, no matter how much of an asshole my brother is, we will always remain friends," Nyla said, pulling away from me.

"I promise," I answered, and I truly meant it.

"Now let's go," she said, grabbing my hand. "What use are these stunning gowns if we aren't showing them off?" Nyla winked.

BELLAMY



y muscles ached from my fight with Cyrus the day before, but I still found myself training the next morning. Pushing myself as hard as I could until my body screamed at me to stop, I finally gave in.

Returning to my room, I found a new set of finery hanging by my wardrobe. I assumed I had Nyla to thank for that. She'd agreed to find me something to match whatever Koraine was wearing to the ball.

The finery consisted of a deep red, almost black set of pants and jacket. The cuffs of the jacket were embroidered with black designs. I pulled a plain white shirt from my wardrobe to wear underneath the jacket.

Dressing in the outfit, I found my golden crown. It was sitting on a cushion in my wardrobe. It wasn't often that I wore the accessory, I hated parading the thing around. It seemed like an excessive and unnecessary way to show my power. Plus, it was incredibly uncomfortable, but I knew I'd be expected to wear it tonight.

I pulled on a pair of black shoes and took a glance in my mirror. I barely recognized myself after these past few days. Dark circles plagued under my eyes from exhaustion. With each passing day, I was losing a bit of myself. Every task my father burdened me with took more of my soul.

Tonight, I wouldn't think about that all. I needed to be there for Koraine, keeping her out of my father's grasp. The other duties of my kingdom could wait.

Deciding to head to the event early, I made my way from my chambers to the ballroom. Already, guests were filing into the palace, ushered by palace workers. Many paused to give me their congratulations. I barely acknowledged them as I searched for the one person I really wanted to find.

After wandering a bit, I confirmed neither my sister nor Koraine had arrived yet.

I wasn't used to being one of the first at an event. The royal family often made their entrances last, but I needed to see her. All day, nerves had plagued me as I mulled over what I'd say to her. Last time I'd seen her was after the fight with Cyrus.

I had told Koraine I couldn't give myself to her the way she pleaded with me to. I still stood by that decision, but it pained me more than she'd ever know. My heart mourned for everything I could've had with Koraine. A genuine and true marriage, but my father made that impossible.

Palace workers began announcing arrivals as the night progressed. Prominent families waltzed down the stairs to the ballroom in their extravagant outfits, as I continually glanced to the top of them, awaiting Koraine's arrival. I found a passing worker and took a flute of champagne from the tray he carried.

Soon, as the room grew packed, I worried that Koraine may not show. Had I been too harsh with her?

As thoughts bombarded my mind, I almost didn't notice the palace workers preparing to announce another arrival. Turning to see who the newest attendee was, my jaw dropped as my eyes landed on Koraine.

She was ravishing.

The moment her foot hit that first step the world stopped. No one else mattered. In that moment, I knew, although I couldn't give her my heart, I would burn the world for her.

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KORAINE



rowds of attendees poured in through the palace's front entry. This was the biggest event I 'd ever attended. I didn't recognize as many attendees this time. The king had spared no expense in inviting every prominent individual and family in Abelon, and decorating extravagantly.

I nervously glanced around, admittedly looking for the prince. A wave of relief washed over me as I didn't spot him. It gave me more time before I'd be forced to face him.

Nyla dragged me along as we joined the line of people waiting to enter the ball. If she wanted, the princess could've skipped the line and made her entrance, but I knew she wouldn't. That wasn't the way Nyla acted. The princess never viewed herself above her people. From what I'd learned these past weeks in Abelon, she was similar to her mother that way.

The line moved slowly as the guards announced the arrival of each attendee before they made their entrance. As I neared the entrance, I saw the long, daunting stairs to the ballroom. With all the eyes below, I grew nervous knowing they'd be on me. Luckily, I hadn't let Nyla talk me into wearing heeled shoes, but I still worried about my long dress. I wasn't used to moving around with so much material trailing behind me.

There were only a few guests left before us. Nyla looked thrilled to finally be nearing the end of the line, her eyes sparkling with intrigue as the celebration came in to full view. My own heart was racing as I finally was able to see the attendees below. The room was filled with at least two hundred people.

"Do you want to go together?" Nyla asked, noticing my clear discomfort. As much as I wanted to accept her offer, I knew I couldn't.

"I think I need to do this on my own," I admitted with a sheepish smile.

If I wanted these people to respect me someday, I had to earn it on my own. I couldn't hide behind Nyla and Bellamy forever. Abelonians would never accept a Morwenian as their leader if I didn't give them a reason to.

The guards placed at the side of the stairs announced Nyla's name and title as we stepped up. With a quick glance back, she made her way down the steps gracefully. She was made for this life, the way she commanded everyone's attention and floated down the stairs was a true wonder to witness.

I was next.

Stepping forward, I waited for the guard to announce my name before descending the staircase. My knees felt weak, and my hands were sweating.

"Future princess consort, Koraine Neroe," the guard called out, making my stomach turn.

Every head in the room turned as my name was finally announced. Attendees were eager to get a look at the Morwenian.

Half way down the steps, my legs wobbled. The gawking stares weren't helping my nerves. I paused to regain my balance, and as I did, I finally spotted the prince. He was watching me with deadly focus. Keeping my eyes locked on him, I started down the steps again. If I just continued to look at Bellamy everyone else would fade into the background.

He moved quickly toward me before I reached the bottom of the steps, extending a hand out, I was forced to accept with all eyes on us. I didn't say a word, letting him lead me off through the crowd of people. As we walked, music began playing and guests carried on with enjoying the food and drinks.

"You look stunning," Bellamy whispered into my ear.

His body pressing close into mine and the low tone of his voice sent butterflies to my stomach. I pushed them aside as best I could.

Guiding me to a side table, the prince offered me a chalice of wine. I willingly accepted, but I still wasn't sure what the prince was thinking. Was he really going to act like nothing happened all night? I knew appearances were important, but I wasn't sure I could do the same.

"Is it what you imagined?" Bellamy asked.

"Huh?"

"The ball, is this what you expected it to be like?" As the words left his mouth, I found his gaze raking over my appearance. He took in every last

detail of my dress.

"Honestly, I didn't expect it to be this..." I trailed off, trying to find the right word. "Big."

The prince gave a warm chuckle.

"This is supposed to be the most extravagant event of the year. A chance for us to show off our passion and love for each other before getting married," he said, like he was reciting a rehearsed explanation.

Now it was my turn to chuckle, snapped back into reality. He cocked his head, trying to read my features. Showing off our passion and love was going to be impossible when the prince was determined to push me away every chance he got.

"What's so funny?" the prince asked.

"I won't pretend that we have some great passion and love between us when you keep pulling me in and pushing me away again. I heard you loud and clear this time, Bellamy. If you want to pretend there is nothing between us, then that's what I'll do," I snapped, letting my emotions get the better of me and hating every word as I said them.

Grabbing my hand, Bellamy pulled me in close. I met his gaze defiantly. I wasn't backing down from this. The flames in his eyes burned bright, and I could feel the heat emanating from his body. A chill ran down my spine, and every inch of me wanted to lean in those last few inches and kiss him. This close, I could smell the familiar scent of cinnamon on him.

"Do not think for one moment that this isn't killing me inside," Bellamy whispered, in that low tone that warmed my core.

Letting go, he turned, stalking off into the crowd.

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KORAINE



andering through the ball, it took me a few minutes to find the princess. She was chatting cheerily with a woman and sipping from a fancy chalice. I felt guilty for interrupting but I knew if left alone my mind would wander back to the prince again. Fighting what was in my heart and listening to my head was becoming harder and harder.

"Koraine!" Nyla shouted the second she saw me approaching. "Koraine, this is Iza. She's my cousin. Our mothers were sisters," she explained, beaming at me.

Relief washed over me, realizing this wasn't one of Nyla's pursuits. I didn't realize the queen had a sister. There was still so much I needed to learn about the royal family and Abelon, that was becoming more apparent.

"It's an honor to meet you," Iza said, grabbing me and pulling me into a hug. I wasn't prepared for the embrace and barely had time to hesitantly hug her back. "Sorry, I should've asked," she said, pulling away with a panicked look on her face.

"It's alright," I laughed. I could smell the wine on the woman's breath, and judging by her rosy cheeks she was already tipsy.

The beat of the music picked up and more people gathered in the center of the ballroom to dance. They spun and moved in coordination. The beat of the music moved through me, and I found myself swaying. Nyla smiled as she saw me enjoying the festivities.

Iza grabbed a nearby man, pulling him out to the center of the room. The pair joined in, twirling and laughing in delight. I wanted nothing more than to join. I'd never been to a ball before, or anything like it. Even if I made a fool of myself, I didn't want to miss out.

The prince would never agree to dance with me after our last conversation, and I wasn't so sure I wanted to be in such an intimate space with him so soon. I could only imagine the commotion it would cause if I pulled another man out into the center of the room. That would be the talk of the night, and draw unwanted attention from the king. Instead, I just watched from the side with Nyla.

Soon the music faded, switching to a new tune. This one was more upbeat than the last. It reminded me of the feeling of riding horseback through an empty field, or exploring the sea freely on the back of Talay. Each note was pure magic and made me want to twirl in circles until I fell over.

Grabbing my hand, Nyla pulled me out into the growing crowd of those dancing. This dance was less structured and coordinated. A rainbow of colors graced the space as women twirled in their elegant dresses. Men tapped their feet and clapped, cheering them on.

Nyla linked her elbow through mine and spun me. We skipped in circles, giggling like children. Soon a large circle formed and the women all joined hands. We shuffled to the side, careful not to step on each other. As the song picked up, so did our speed.

Suddenly, we came to a pause. The women moved in until we were hip to hip. Then we skipped backwards, raising our hands up high. Letting go, I twirled off. Letting the music move through me.

With each turn, the world around me slowed. The people became faded blurs of color, and all I could hear was the music moving me. On one of the turns, a presence just beyond the dancing guests caught my eye. His arms were crossed and his gaze never left me. The prince was observing me like I was his prey.

My turns slowed, our eyes meeting. For a moment, I considered going to him. Maybe he'd changed his mind after all. As I did, he slipped off into the crowd again. Frustration built in my chest.

Suddenly, the music stopped. Turning, I found everyone facing the entry stairs. At the top stood the king, dressed in all black with his shining gold crown on his head. His black hair was a stark contrast to the accessory. He looked down upon us, his subjects spread before him. Without waiting to be announced, he strode down the steps.

When he made it to the bottom, those nearest bowed their heads. Guests parted, letting him pass. There was a makeshift throne set at the end of the

ballroom that he aimed for. Every guest he passed gave small gestures of respect.

As he made it to the throne, he turned to the crowd. Raising his hands in the air, he sent flames flying to the torches on either side of his throne, lighting them.

"Let the celebrations commence!" he bellowed, a large grin plastered on his face.

I watched as he sat on his throne, amused by his loyal subjects before him. With a small flick of his hand, he signaled for someone to approach. My heart stopped as I recognized Cyrus walking toward the king.

Leaning in the king whispered to the guard. Cyrus nodded, heading in the direction of another smaller entry to the ballroom. I wasn't familiar with where it led to, but something in me told me to find out. The captain was probably just doing his job for the king, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I needed to follow him.

SLIPPING AWAY from the ball unnoticed was easy. Everyone was consumed with dancing and drinking, and paid me no attention. Even the prince was caught in conversation with Ronan.

Following Cyrus unnoticed was a daunting task. There were minimal places to hide in the hall he walked down. There were a few pillars that I slipped behind, trying to remain unseen. I paused behind the very last one, waiting to see where Cyrus wandered off to. My heart was beating hard enough that I could feel it in my throat. Peeking around the pillar, I was still able to see the captain.

Cyrus rounded a corner, and I pressed myself against the wall, sliding closer to the corner. I poked my head around, just enough to see him meeting with a man. Their voices were quiet, and I could just barely make out their words.

"Why am I here Cyrus? You know what happens to me if anyone spots me here," the man demanded.

"This is the final payment," Cyrus said in a hushed tone.

I didn't recognize the other man. He was no guard or noble that spent time at the palace. His pale skin tone was odd for an Abelonian. "There is a boat waiting by the docks for you. The captain will take you to Zetron and you can find passage back to Luheo from there," Cyrus explained.

I slapped a hand over my mouth before my gasp could escape. This man wasn't Abelonian, he was from Luheo. The kingdom that was about to go to war with us.

Cyrus was paying someone from Luheo while the palace was looking for a traitor. As much as I didn't want to believe it, the pit in my stomach told me I knew exactly what was happening.

Cyrus had betrayed Abelon.

Bellamy had never trusted Cyrus, and now I knew I shouldn't have either.

Before either man noticed me I needed to get back to the ballroom. Pulling away from the corner, I rushed off. I ran down the hallway, carrying my dress. My flat shoes were almost silent as I tried to remain light on my feet.

As I approached the doorway back to the ballroom, I risked a glance over my shoulder. I came to a sudden halt at what I saw. Cyrus was standing at the end, watching me. His face remained trained, but I recognized the fire burning in his eyes. His burns on his neck were still a vibrant red, and my stomach turned at the sight. He would kill me for this. Slowly, he shook his head, walking off down the hall away from me. I may have been safe for now, but I could no longer trust a soul within the walls until I found Bellamy. There were many ways Cyrus could have me killed, and deep down I knew there were many people willing to do it for him.

Hurrying back to the ballroom, I needed to find Nyla or Bellamy to share what I'd overheard. Cyrus's stare had promised death. It was almost unbelievable. Deceiving the royal family would be hard, but not impossible. He'd used the cover of the ball to slip off to this meeting unnoticed. No one would blink an eye at him.

Entering the ballroom, I tried to rush across the room to find the prince or princess, but kept bumping into guests. Everyone was pushing toward the throne, the king standing ready to address the room.

As the king's speech began, I paused to listen.

"Welcome everyone to this wonderful occasion!" he bellowed across the room. The way his voice boomed like thunder commanded every last person's attention. "Tomorrow we will be joining two great nations," the king continued, earning a few weary whispers at the mention of Morwen. "Tomorrow also marks the unification of two strong allies in this upcoming war against Luheo. Many of you have heard of my son's recent defeat, but now he has rectified his mistake."

I couldn't be hearing him correctly. Did he mean to say Morwen had agreed to fight in this war against Luheo? Peace negotiation or not, I could not picture the king of Morwen agreeing to enter an unnecessary war. Our people abhorred senseless battle. This was a reach even for the king of Abelon.

Tilting my head, I swore the king's eyes found mine in the crowd. He remained trained on me as he continued.

"My son's bride will help lead us to victory over Luheo. She has agreed to convince her people to submit to our requests and help us in defeating the air kingdom once and for all," the king bellowed to the room with his gaze still on me. He was waiting for my reaction.

His words elicited cheers from the crowd. I was forced to listen in complete disgust and horror. Trying to hide my emotions, I could feel myself tensing. I couldn't show him that his words affected me. It was exactly what he wanted.

My stomach sunk, and only cold fury remained where there was once hope. The king wanted me to convince my kingdom to join in a war they had no part in being in. How did that make any sense? I came here to allow my kingdom peace, not to cause them more hardship.

War would tear my people apart. The air kingdom was no stranger to battle and would leave my people devastated. Was this the king's plan the entire time? Weaken my people through another war to make his kingdom stronger.

Spotting Nyla in the crowd, one glance told me she was just as clueless as I'd been. Spotting me, she mouthed I'm sorry with a sympathetic look.

"This is a joyous day, celebrate!" the king commanded, raising his own chalice of wine.

Everyone mimicked the motion and returned to their festivities. The music resumed once more and the merriments of the night continued. Not a single soul noticed me as I stood frozen in place.

Strong hands gripped my shoulders, and I flinched, thinking Cyrus had come back for me already. Turning, I was prepared to make my escape.

Instead, I was chest to chest with Bellamy.

"Don't make a scene, we need to get away from prying eyes," Bellamy whispered sternly.

Shocked, I didn't know how to respond. I didn't want to move or follow him anywhere. I wanted answers. How could he have done this to me? I thought he was starting to care for me.

"Did you know?" I asked, needing to hear it from his mouth. When he didn't answer, I grew more impatient. "Did you?" I shouted.

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BELLAMY



he horror written on Koraine's face was clear. I needed to get her far from this ballroom before people took notice. The king had done this on purpose. The ultimate test to see how I'd react. I didn't let him see me losing my composure. My face remained trained, and I tried to plea with Koraine as subtly as I could. If I could just get her to come with me, I could usher her away from everyone's watchful eyes.

"We can leave," I tried, hoping she wanted to leave as much as I did. "My father won't dare stop us with everyone around to witness it."

Hesitantly, she let me guide her through the room. She knew as well as I did there were consequences for defying the king. I knew she wouldn't risk speaking against him here. Quietly, she followed me.

I wasn't sure exactly where to take her. Every inch of the palace had ears and whispers carried. I needed to explain to her that I'd never intended for this to happen. That I would never use her like this. All night I'd been trying to think of every possible way I could avoid this come tomorrow. I never expected my father to announce this to all the attendees tonight. She needed to know I would never use her emotions or trick her into falling for me to force her into this. I had only been trying to protect her from my father by distancing myself and I'd still failed.

Heading straight out of the palace entry, I kept walking until we reached the flames of the gates. Parting them, I allowed Koraine to step through. Her face was pale, and her eyebrows were pulled together in thought. I tried to reach out to take her hand, but she pulled away. A lump formed in my throat, realizing that I'd done everything wrong. My father had manipulated me, and played me for a fool.

Trying to think where to take Koraine, there was only one spot in the kingdom where I would be able to safely talk with her. The walk would be a little long, but it was worth it to get away from the palace.

Koraine carried the bottom of her dress, careful not to trip on the cobblestone of the road we walked. I kicked a pebble, watching it bounce ahead of us. The silence was slowly killing me on the inside. I wanted to explain everything, but it wasn't safe yet. The open windows of the apartments we passed told me we were not necessarily as alone as we thought.

The moon provided a dull illuminating light in the dark night. It was a clear night, and I spotted most of the constellations above. The constellation Odaesia, named after the goddess, shone brightest.

Koraine's hair swayed as she walked, and the moon's light glistened against it. I couldn't help but keep glancing her way.

After what felt like forever, dragged out by the silence, we finally reached our destination. I'd led Koraine to a small cliffside overlooking the sea. There was a stretched reflection of the moon on the surface of the water, the dark waves rolling in a rhythmic pattern, crashing against the rocks beneath us.

Koraine stared off into the distance, keeping her distance from the edge. For a heartbeat, I didn't understand her hesitation. The devastation on her face was about more than my father's speech. Realization washed over me as I suddenly remembered her last experience in the sea.

"I'm sorry, we can go if you want," I offered quickly, my cheeks warming.

How could I be so foolish for bringing her out here?

"No," Koraine said her voice distant. "I need to be able to face it."

"You don't have to now if you aren't ready," I said gently. I'd find us another place to go, away from curious Abelonians.

Ignoring my offer, Koraine moved toward the edge of the cliff. It was a long drop to the sea below. She sat down, letting her legs dangle over. The cool autumn breeze blew through her hair, her braids were coming loose.

I moved to join her. Sitting on the ledge, I tried not to think about the drop beneath me. Even though I was a dragon rider and used to heights, it didn't mean I ever got used to the fear of falling from them. Imry was no where nearby to save me if I slipped. At least if Koraine fell, she stood a

chance if she manipulated the water to catch her. After how I'd treated her would she bother catching me?

"Did you know?" she whispered the same question she'd asked at the palace. The defeat in her voice pained me.

"I knew he wanted to use you to win over Morwen," I admitted, watching my words hit her like physical blows. "But I had no idea he would make that speech tonight. You have to believe, I've been trying to think of any way to get you out of this."

"Why wouldn't you tell me? I could've helped. Instead, you pushed me away," Koraine argued.

"I know," I admitted, realizing I had done everything wrong. Our hands brushed against each other, and Koraine didn't pull hers away. The touch of her skin on mine had my heart racing.

With all the uncertainty, I knew one thing. What I felt for Koraine was real. She lit a flame deep within me that I never knew had been extinguished.

Her blue eyes searched mine. I desperately needed her to believe me. If I lost my chance because of my father I'd never forgive myself.

"Come with me. I want to show you something," I said, standing. Extending my hand, Koraine hesitantly accepted.

WW

GUIDING KORAINE DOWN A NARROW PATH, I led her to the spot beneath the cliff we'd just been atop. When my feet hit the pebbled beach, I could tell by the way my steps grew louder. Using my free hand, I created a small fire for light. The location wasn't far. Just a short walk down the beach.

Koraine blindly followed me, and I couldn't help but wonder what was running through her mind. I still couldn't tell if she was angry with me after the palace. Her willingness to follow me had surprised me.

After walking down the beach, we came across the entrance to a cove. Here the pebbles ended, and thick greenery grew near the mouth of a river. Leading Koraine along it, the walk was short to where the river opened into a pool of water.

I heard our destination before I saw it. A waterfall cascaded over a short cliff and beside me, Koraine's eyes glistened with curiosity.

We moved closer until we were only feet away from the waterfall. A thin walkway of stone extended from the wall of the cliff. It trailed off behind the waterfall. Again, I asked for Koraine's trust, extending my hand to her once more. She took it, gripping tightly.

Leading her along the path, I was careful not to let either of us slip. The moisture from the waterfall kept the stone near it slick.

Slipping behind the waterfall, I created a large fire in my hands. There was a pile of logs already in the cavern, and I sent the fire straight toward it, lighting it. I'd collected the logs days before, planning to someday bring Koraine here after the wedding. The fire illuminated the space, revealing the cavern the size of bedroom chambers.

The wonder on Koraine's face was enough to tell me I'd made the right choice. She needed a safe space in this kingdom. One where she could feel herself, without being under the watchful eyes of the palace.

"What is this place?" she asked.

"Probably the only place you'll find water in this kingdom of flames. It's a natural hot spring so the water here is always warm," I chuckled. "And now it's yours."

Her head whipped in my direction. I watched as her lips parted slightly, but she couldn't get the words out. This was the closest thing to Morwen she'd have. I hadn't wanted to show it to her like this, but after my father's speech I knew she needed to get away. To feel like she was no longer an outcast amongst Abelonians.

"Why?" she asked.

"You deserve it," I admitted. "Ervin mentioned you told him about your home and how you missed it. I wanted to give you a small piece of Morwen here."

My father's speech had made me realize one thing. Koraine was no safer in Abelon if I distanced myself than she was if I just admitted my desires. We were both caught under his controlling rule and there was nothing we could do to change that. At least together we stood a better chance of surviving, especially with war on the horizon.

Koraine looked surprised by what I'd admitted.

"I thought if I kept you at arm's length I could protect you from my father. Now I see that isn't true. No matter what he will find a way to manipulate us both. I just wanted to give you a place where you felt safe. Where you felt more at home."

I took a step closer to her. The dark maroon and black of her dress somehow looked natural on her, and I imagined what it'd be like slowly removing the straps off of her shoulder, letting the material fall from her body.

"When did things change?" she asked, her voice a whisper and something vulnerable shining in her gaze.

"From the moment you stepped off that damned ship I knew you were going to be my weakness. When I saw Cyrus's hands on you, I just about lost my mind. I wanted to incinerate him where he stood. And again, when I saw those smugglers trying to harm you, I couldn't bear it. You have a hold on my heart, that no matter how hard I try I can't shake."

"But we are born enemies. Fire and water aren't meant to work. Our kingdoms will always be rivals even with this peace negotiation," she barely got the words out.

"If you want to vilify me, that's fine, but I won't keep denying how I feel."

I watched as the meaning behind the words slammed into her. Koraine's eyes remained glued to mine. Even as she took slow steps toward me. Stopping mere inches from me, she leaned in on her tip toes. Her breath grazed my ear as she whispered into it.

"Falling for you is wrong," she paused, pressing a hand against my chest. "But no more than being given to another kingdom as a negotiation."

"You belong to no one," I assured her in a low growl.

"What if right now, I just want to belong to you?" She glanced up from under her thick eyelashes.

Unable to hold back any longer, I leaned in to kiss her. She met me half way, our lips colliding in a desperate fury of passion.

She stumbled back from the force of my kiss, but hurried back into me. I could feel the cold of her skin as she leaned into my chest, in her thin ballgown, Koraine had nothing keeping her warm.

Guiding her while our lips remained locked, I backed her toward the fire. Her back bumped into the cavern wall and I placed an arm beside her head. My free hand found her chin, tipping it up to me. Breaking apart, I looked over her face. I was afraid I would find regret, but instead I saw desire.

"Say it again," I whispered, needing to hear the words once more.

"I belong to you. Every last part of me is yours, Bellamy," she said, catching her breath.

The sound of my name on her lips was enough to unravel any remaining composure I had. I quickly found my lips on hers once more. Trailing kisses down her neck, I could feel the tiny raised bumps on her skin as a chill ran through her body.

I let my hand explore down her body, thumbing under the strap of her dress. I brushed aside the strap, letting it drop off her shoulder. Exposing more of her skin, I dipped my head, placing light kisses on it.

Her hands were frantically exploring my own body. As we kissed, I slipped my tongue into her mouth, claiming her. Our desires took over, and I wasn't willing to stop anytime soon. I'd spend all night in this cavern, making sure Koraine forgot the worries plaguing us.

My hands wandered even lower, lifting the skirt of Koraine's dress. The material was bulky and endless. Lifting her leg, her knee pressed into my side, and I grasped the back of her thigh. It was impossible for me to get beneath the never-ending layers.

"This just won't do," I chuckled.

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KORAINE



ellamy's hands explored every inch of my body. Frantically, he helped slide my dress off my body. I shivered as the cool air brushed against my now exposed skin. The only thing left covering me was my remaining undergarments. My hands pulled at the jacket he still wore, urging it off.

I welcomed the distraction from everything that had happened. Tomorrow I'd have to face the king's demands and decide whether to help persuade my kingdom to war, but for now I was lost in the pure bliss that was the prince.

His hands felt like they left trails of fire across my body. The warmth in my core spreading, demanding that he give me more. I leaned in, kissing him. Flinching, the prince bit my lip lightly. His hand found its way into my long hair.

As I settled into a comfortable rhythm of kisses and wandering hands, he tugged a little at my hair. Pulling my head back gently, he exposed my neck. Small kisses and playful nips had me aching for more.

"You are mine right now, and you will be patient as I pleasure every inch of you."

I couldn't tell if it was a threat or a promise, but I didn't care. I wanted his mouth on every part of me. Letting go, the prince found his newest challenge. Tugging at the bra I wore, he slid the straps off my shoulder. As they fell, I slid the garment off, exposing my breasts. My nipples hardened, meeting the cool air.

"If you don't like what I am doing, stop me, but otherwise relax and let me worship you like you deserve." His hand slid out of my hair and trailed down my body, heading for my core. My cheeks warmed as his fingers crawled along my thigh I had pressed against him, and eventually found the hem of my underwear. I was surprised at how responsive my body was to his touch. I writhed a little as he teased me, slipping his thumb only slightly under the fabric.

Soon, his hand fully slid under, and he rubbed lazy circles along my core, teasing me. My back arched, begging him to go further. He gave me a mischievous smile, clearly enjoying the effect he had on me.

I tensed as his fingers found my most sensitive part, sliding easily in and out in a rhythmic pattern. My back slammed into the wall of the cavern as he increased his pace.

I moaned, unable to hide my pleasure.

He kept his quickening pace, and with every thrust of his fingers I could feel myself craving more and more. I wouldn't last long like this. The pleasure was unimaginable. I knew I needed more of him inside of me, but he wasn't going to give me it until he had his way with me.

"Bellamy," I managed to get out.

"Say my name like that again," he demanded, his fingers grazing over my most sensitive spot, sending a shudder down my spine.

"Bellamy," I moaned louder, with more confidence this time.

"Goddesses, you are going to be my undoing," he said placing kisses along my neck and nipping lightly at my skin.

Soon I could feel myself approaching my undoing. I couldn't hang on any longer at this rate. His fingers were coaxing me to a climax. The way Bellamy's gaze poured over me had my skin on fire and I loved it. There wasn't anything I would trade this for.

"Please, Bellamy," I begged, urging him to send me to my finish.

His lips crashed into mine, and he only pulled away for a short moment.

"My name on your lips is the only thing I ever need to hear again," he whispered, increasing the pace once more.

I couldn't hold on any longer. Throwing my head back, I moaned as I climaxed. My body shuddering through every blissful part of it. The prince slowed his pace, only removing his fingers once my orgasm ended. I found his gaze, smirking wildly.

"That was..." I struggled to find my words between labored breaths.

"Perfection, bliss, everything you've imagined," Bellamy offered, with an amused smile. "I was going to say alright," I teased, shrugging.

Spinning me away from the wall of the cavern, Bellamy lifted me. Pressing kisses to my neck, cheek, and lips he carried me closer to the waterfall. I slid out of his grip, removing my legs from being wrapped around his waist. On my tip toes, I barely was tall enough to press a kiss to his lips without him bending in to meet my demand.

A wild idea formed in my head. A grin spread across my lips as the prince's thumb lightly slid over them. He cocked his head, reading the change in my features. Before he could question it, I slipped away, running toward the waterfall and kicking off my underwear as I went.

I threw myself through the water, knowing what waited on the other side. I used my abilities, forcing the water in the pool below to catch me without a splash. It was the first time since the smugglers I felt like I could face my fear and embrace who I was.

"Come on, Bellamy," I teased. "I'm not coming back until you get in too."

I knew the prince hated the water, but I hoped he trusted me enough to follow me in.

"You're insane," he shouted from behind the waterfall.

"I'm sorry I can't hear you from in there," I shouted back.

For a moment, I thought he may leave me in the water alone. I shivered as a cool breeze hit my wet skin. I debated whether to climb out and retreat back to the warmth of the cavern. As I began to move, the prince came rushing out of the cavern, jumping through the waterfall. He'd removed the rest of his clothing.

He hit the water with a splash that soaked my hair.

Under the moonlight, every perfect part of him was visible. The muscular core I wanted to run my hands along, and the small trail of hair that disappeared under the surface of the water.

"It's cold out here, are you trying to kill us both?" he asked, closing the distance between us. .

"It's not that bad. The water itself is warm, and the weather hasn't cooled enough for it to be freezing temperatures yet."

He just shook his head, moving toward me. Under the surface, his hands found my waist, pulling me in close. My naked body pressed against his. Even in the water, I could feel the heat radiating from him, welcoming me closer. I wrapped my arms lazily around his neck, hoping he wouldn't make us leave just yet.

The touch of my skin against him seemed to break any control he had left. He leaned in kissing me hard, his hands cupping the back of my thighs and lifting me. My legs wrapped around him, and I could feel his cock hardening against my core.

I completely forgot the nip of the cool breeze as I felt my body light ablaze, reacting to his length. I needed him more than I cared to admit. Sliding my hand under the water, I gripped his cock firmly. Stroking slowly, I met his gaze. His pleasure flashed across his face, and I paused for a moment.

"Are you sure?" I asked.

"Yes, take me whatever way you please," he answered.

Guiding him inside me, I moaned as I felt him enter. At first he pumped slowly, allowing me to adjust to the size of him. It had been a while since I'd been with anyone, and the sting of him pressing further caused a small sound of pain to escape my lips.

"Just hold on for a moment," he whispered, gently.

Soon the pain faded and turned to pleasure. Every strong thrust sent shivers down my spine. I held tight around his neck as I rode him. The water made our bodies slick, and a few times I almost lost my grip. Clinging tight, I felt my nails dig into his skin, leaving behind small scratches.

The prince thrust into me for what felt like a euphoric eternity, sending rippling waves of pleasure through me. I tilted my hips a little to give him better access, and a deep guttural moan left his mouth.

"Goddesses," Bellamy said, his fingers digging hungrily into my ass. "You feel so good."

My head fell back, exposing my neck and the prince took this as an invitation to kiss and nip at the skin. The combination of sensations was driving me crazy. Again, I was approaching my climax.

"I can't last much longer," I panted, and he kissed me hard.

That was the last of my control. I let go, allowing myself to roll through the waves of pleasure once more. Bellamy's pace became primal, and his thrusts were powerful. I knew he was close, too. I could feel the desperation in each movement. Soon, I felt his body tense as he came. I let him pump through the pleasure, and as he finally slowed, I loosened my grip on him. Gently, he put me down in the water. I wanted to protest, and spend all night with him here, but as my breathing slowed, I started to feel the cold air against the back of my neck once more. My body shivered, no longer from pleasure.

"Come on, let's get you warmed up," Bellamy said, gently pushing my hair out of my face and tucking it behind my ear. He pressed a small kiss to my forehead, scooping me into his arms.

I let him carry me back into the cavern. Tiredness was consuming every inch of me, and I knew I would need sleep soon.

TOGETHER WE SAT WATCHING the flames of the fire Bellamy created dance across the walls of the cavern. It was too late in the night to journey back to the palace. With high tide, the thin beach would be covered in water. Instead, I cuddled into the prince's side as we sat beside the fire. The warmth of the flames dried my damp hair.

Sunrise was approaching rapidly, and soon we'd be rushed around the palace before getting married. Nyla had taken care of the dress and all the details for me.

"You know, I don't think I mind marrying you," I teased, as my head settled against the prince's chest.

"Does that have anything to do with how we just spent the night?" the prince laughed.

"I won't lie, that part certainly contributes to the decision." A wide grin spread across my face.

My eyelids were heavy with exhaustion, but part of me wished we could do it all again. I supposed I had eternity now with Bellamy to explore anything we wanted.

The constant trickle of the waterfall behind us was soothing to my ears. The sound of running water always calmed me. This felt like a piece of home. With my eyes closed, I could almost picture myself back there, showing Bellamy the cascading falls and flowing rivers of the kingdom.

"I have two brothers," I whispered, my words barely louder than the crackles of the fire before us.

"What?" Bellamy asked, pulling back a little from me.

"You once asked about my family. I have two brothers, one is older and one is younger than me, Emmett and Caspian. Emmett would hate it here," I chuckled softly, "but Caspian would love it I think. In fact, he would've convinced someone to let him ride a dragon his first day here."

"I'll take him for a ride the first day he visits," Bellamy said. Now it was my turn to be surprised.

"When he visits?" I questioned.

"Once we are wed, there is no reason your family cannot come visit. Your parents and brothers can come to Abelon as often as they wish, under my protection. I promise," he said, pressing a gentle kiss to my forehead.

I cringed back, thinking about my father. I had almost forgotten the betrayal my heart felt until I imagined seeing him again so soon. I may have found my place in Abelon, but that didn't mean I was ready to forgive him for sending me in the first place. He was my father, my protector. He was supposed to be the one person I could rely on to protect me and he had handed me over to our long-time enemy without even a second thought.

"What's wrong?" Bellamy brushed a stray strand of hair from my face, revealing a stray tear slipping down my cheek.

"I don't know if I'm ready to face him," I admitted.

"Who?"

"My father. He's the one who agreed to send me here, without any protest he just agreed to let the king use me as a pawn."

Bellamy nodded, understanding what I meant. In a way, I knew he truly understood what I was feeling. He had no more choice than I did in this marriage, forced into it by his own father.

"I know it may not mean much, but I want you to know I whole heartedly choose you," Bellamy finally said, holding my gaze. My heart skipped a beat, and my own words were caught in my throat. "I am not marrying you tomorrow because of what our fathers decided for us. I am marrying you because I know that with you by my side we will rebuild this kingdom into the prospering and unyielding place it always should've been."

"It does mean something," I said, watching Bellamy cock his head. "You care so much for your people. I've watched as you've fought for them and beside them. That's the Bellamy that I am falling for. Not the prince the world sees, the one who has a heart on fire with a passion for his kingdom."

Before the last words left my lips, Bellamy's mouth was on mine. His kiss was delicate, and I savored every last taste of him.

"Sunrise will be here before we know it. If we want to make it to our wedding, you should try to get a little rest before then," Bellamy suggested.

My heavy eyes refused to argue.

I let the flames of the fire lull me. My head fell against the prince, and I felt at home in his arms. Closing my eyes, I let my mind wander, imagining what the future would hold for us after our wedding vows were exchanged. I would help run a kingdom. Was I ready for that responsibility? Was I ready to lead my people into a new war just to help Bellamy protect his people? I certainly didn't have the answers now, but I would need to decide soon.

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BELLAMY



woke with a startle, quickly realizing that I was still in the cavern with Koraine. At some point, I'd also drifted to sleep, and we'd ended up curled together beside the now extinguished fire. My arm was wrapped tightly around her, holding her close to me. I could tell by her deep breaths she was still asleep. The fire had gone out long before, and the remaining scraps were already cool.

Peeking through the waterfall were rays of early morning light. I hated to wake Koraine, but we needed to go.

Gently, I pressed a kiss to the back of her head. She stirred, her eyes blinking away sleep.

"Bellamy?" she questioned, only half awake. Her body wiggled in my arms, turning to face me.

Suddenly, her eyes widened.

"The wedding-" she began.

"Relax. It's still early morning. There is plenty of time to get back," I assured her, not wanting to admit the rest of what I needed to tell her. "But we really should be getting back soon."

I hoped my face didn't reveal my worry. Koraine had enough to be anxious about. She didn't need to know the palace may very well already be searching for us. We disappeared early from the festivities of the night, with minimal interaction with the guests. I already knew my father would be displeased.

"Will they send guards to look for us?" Koraine asked, sitting up.

Propping myself up off the cavern floor, I met her gaze.

"I'm sure Cyrus is already searching for you," I said, rolling my eyes. The captain of the guard was a nuisance and a threat. I wouldn't allow him within feet of my soon to be wife. If he even laid a hand on her from this moment on, he would be reduced to mere ashes in the blink of an eye.

"Cyrus," Koraine whispered, like she had just remembered he existed.

"Don't worry I'll handle him," I said, softening my features.

"It's not that," she answered timidly. "I saw something last night. Something I was coming to tell you when your father began his speech."

I cocked my head, waiting for her to elaborate.

"I almost forgot in the heat of everything last night. Cyrus is the traitor you've been searching for."

I flinched, as if Koraine's words had physically struck me. Cyrus had betrayed Abelon? I hated the man and distrusted his motives, but never had I imagined he'd betray his kingdom.

"That can't be. Cyrus is the captain of the guard. He's completely loyal to my father."

"I know what I saw, Bellamy," she said, her eyes narrowing.

"Why would he betray us? All he's ever wanted is power in Abelon. Ever since we were kids, he's been on a mission to gain more power, especially after his father died. Helping Luheo accomplishes the exact opposite."

"Maybe it's his twisted way of getting Morwen to help Abelon finally defeat Luheo. Or maybe it's about revenge for his father's death," Koraine shrugged. "Think about it. You may have peace with Morwen, but you don't have their full support. Now your father wants me to convince them to join you in war. It's all connected somehow. It has to be."

My father.

That was it. Cyrus wouldn't have betrayed my father. He was acting on his orders. I was willing to bet my life on it. Which meant my father knowingly sent my men and I off to slaughter, in his own twisted way to punish me and gain Morwen's support to destroy the air kingdom once and for all.

"My father orchestrated this. Not Cyrus," I growled, clenching my fists.

"I just don't understand. Morwen would never listen to a word I said. I'm just a bargaining piece to them. The only way I would convince them to act is if I were dead. Then they'd surely end up at war with Abelon, but there is no way I could sway them to support war with Luheo."

Something about her words triggered a distant memory. A familiar feeling, one that filled me with dread. The more I thought about it, the more sure I became.

"What?" she asked, reading my face. Her curious, deep blue eyes trying to understand where my mind had went.

"He's going to kill you," I said, my brows pulling together.

Koraine let out a nervous laugh. Part of me desperately wished I was joking, but the other half knew how my father thought and acted. He was a ruthless king, willing to do anything to gain power. One death meant nothing to him if it gained him a kingdom. He'd threatened her death multiple times already. Koraine was worth more to him dead than she was alive. Especially once the wedding ceremony was complete.

"You're serious?" she asked, her brows raising.

"He would've made it look like Luheo killed you. If the air kingdom attacked the new princess consort and killed her, then Morwen would be furious. Potentially enough to back my father in a war against air. They'd view it as Luheo ruining their chances at peace with Abelon. It would be a direct act of war against your kingdom. That would be reason enough to ally with my father, if he proposed the idea."

Horrific realization sunk in, and I watched as Koraine's skepticism turned to panic.

"I don't understand. How would he even accomplish that?"

"There are plenty of men disloyal to their kingdom who would take any job for a certain price. It wouldn't be hard for him to pay someone with air abilities to assassinate you, framing Luheo. The same way he had Cyrus hire someone to warn Luheo that our offensive was coming. I have to admit, he thought of almost everything to make his plan work."

The wedding couldn't happen. The moment it did, we'd be signing Koraine's death sentence. Once we were married, she would be no longer safe in this kingdom. Everyone would be a potential enemy.

Another realization crossed my mind, but I didn't want to believe it. This wouldn't be the first time a death would convince people to back a war they never wanted. History was repeating itself, and I needed to stop it before it was too late.

"We need to go back now," I said urgently, grabbing Koraine's hand.

Koraine's feature's hardened. My own anxiety had pushed me to hurry back without thinking for a moment about how Koraine may be feeling.

"I promise I'll protect you even if it means my own life in trade," I said, my eyes meeting her own and giving her hand a small reassuring squeeze. This did little to calm her, but at least Koraine let me lead her back to the palace without question.

I LEFT Koraine in my chambers, with careful instructions not to leave or trust anyone until I returned. I had no idea how far my father would take this, and I had to assume everyone in the palace was loyal to only him. Rushing through the halls, I made my way to the throne room and hoped I was lucky enough that he'd be there prior to the wedding.

The ceremony would take place in the throne room under the witness of one of the priestesses from a nearby temple. It was rare the priestesses ventured from their temple, but they made exceptions to come when summoned to the palace. The wealthiest nobles would also be invited to witness the ceremony.

Opening the grand doors, my heart felt slightly relieved to find my father sitting on his throne. A lump formed in my throat as that relief quickly turned to anticipation, knowing I had to confront him. Not only for what he planned in the future for Koraine, but also what he had done in the past.

"Ah, Bellamy. There you are. I was beginning to worry I would have to send my guards to find you and your bride. You have, for once, made my life much easier."

I tried not to let my enmity show. I hid my clenched fists behind my back and slowly approached the throne. My careful strides echoed on the tiled floor. My father's eyes followed me, his brows furrowing as he realized I wasn't here to discuss the wedding.

"Why have you come here before the ceremony?" My father demanded, his mood souring quickly.

"What do you have planned for Koraine after we are married?" I asked, my tone dark.

"She is to be the princess consort and will soon unite our people," he shrugged, sitting back into his throne.

"How?" I pushed.

"She will speak on our behalf. Show Morwen it is in their best interest to ally with us. Her people will join in our fight once they see she has been well cared for here."

"Lies," I whispered.

"Excuse me?" my father asked, now leaning forward. His crown tipped forward, and the flames behind the throne grew in size.

"We both know her words would mean nothing to them. We have been enemies for decades. Centuries even. Why would they listen to a nobleman's daughter now? You planned to kill her and frame Luheo for it. It's the only way you'd be able to convince Morwen to ally with you, if you have a new common enemy."

My father let out a dark chuckle.

"You're smarter than I gave you credit for. I have to say I'm impressed that you worked this all out yourself. Yes, I plan to stage Koraine's death, exacting revenge on General Neroe, and pin it on Luheo. If you have any sense at all, you'll keep your mouth shut about it, or you'll find yourself in a similar fate. Imagine how much more believable it would be if the crowned prince were also killed beside his new wife."

The look in my father's eyes promised death. I knew he meant the threat. Family meant nothing to him. Only power would satisfy him.

"You killed her," I whispered, horrified. I didn't want to believe it to be true, but I knew there was no other explanation.

"Killed her? No, not yet. Your bride is very much still alive, I assure you."

"Mother," I said, unable to meet his stern gaze.

He'd done the same thing during the last war, having my mother sacrificed to sway the last of the support he needed from his people to fight in the war against Morwen. It's why Koraine had been so confused when she'd learned of my mother's death. Morwen didn't know about their king killing my mother because it wasn't their king who did it.

It was my own father.

"Clever," the king mused. "I didn't think you'd ever piece that together."

"How could you?" I shouted, my hostility boiling over. Flames danced in my hands that now hung at my sides.

"What are you going to do? Kill me?" the king laughed, looking at the flames I held.

"She loved you," I said, heartbroken. I still couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"She loved this kingdom enough, that she would've given her life for it. I knew the only way to convince our people to support our fight against Morwen was to make them see Morwen the way I did. The cold-blooded killers and enemy that they are. Framing them for the death of our queen was the only way to do so. I knew she would have happily died to ensure our people lived. She wanted more for them. More than this desolate land that is barely survivable."

"You're wrong. She wouldn't have wanted this. She never would have wanted our people to go to war."

Every life was precious to her. Even those of our enemies. My stomach felt sick knowing my father had used her like a pawn.

"I won't let you do this again," I said.

"You don't have a choice. The plan is already in motion. Already I have sent guards to your chambers to retrieve your bride and ready her for the ceremony. I knew the moment you both returned to the palace today. Once the ceremony is complete, her fate is sealed. There is nothing you can do now to stop this. Even if you warned her it would be too late."

That couldn't be true. I had to get to Koraine, and fast. I couldn't allow them to bring her to my father. I wouldn't let the wedding ceremony happen. No place in this kingdom would be safe now for her, but I would figure it out. I had to get her out of this palace. Out of this kingdom.

"I'll kill you for what you've done," I growled, tempted to strike the king where he sat.

"No, Bellamy," he said my name with an amused tone. "You won't, because you need me. Without me, you are nothing. Without me, the people you love so much and want to save in the city will suffer. You think conditions in the lower city are bad now? If one of the other wealthy families took power, they'd only become worse. You and your sister would have a price on your heads to prevent you from taking the throne. The entire kingdom would be thrown into chaos. If you killed me, they may even execute you for treason."

I knew most of it was only empty threats and speculation, but part of me also knew some of the king's warning held truth to it. If I killed him now, there'd be chaos. Already many of the noble's ached for more power and

control in Abelon. The death of the king would be the perfect catalyst for them to claim it.

I couldn't touch the king. Not until I had a better plan. For now, my focus needed to be on saving Koraine. Without waiting to be dismissed, I turned hurrying from the throne room. Running to my chambers, I prayed I wasn't too late. I needed Koraine to still be there so I could come up with a new plan. As I approached my chambers, my heart sunk.

There at the end of the hallway, my door was cracked open.

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BELLAMY



ntering the room, I immediately spotted the two guards trying to coerce Koraine to follow them. Pride swelled in my chest as I watched her refuse, listening to the warning I'd given her to stay put. I knew that she could handle herself, and deal with these two guards, but we had no time to waste.

"I already told you, I'm not going anywhere without the prince," Koraine shouted, not realizing I'd entered the room.

Her stubbornness was showing, and she placed her hands on her hips, adding to her displeasure. Her back was to me, and I let a small smirk show before training my features again.

"Leave, now!" I demanded, startling the two guards.

"But my prince-"

"Now!" I cut the guard off from arguing. I felt pity for the pair until I remembered the threat they posed to Koraine. The king had given them an order and to disobey was ensuring punishment.

Warily, the two guards left the room. They exchanged nervous glances, but didn't question my orders further. I knew my father would just send more guards the moment he discovered these two had failed, which was why we needed to act fast.

There was no time to pack or consider the plan further. I was getting Koraine out of this damned kingdom before it was too late.

"Are you alright?" I asked Koraine, hoping the guards hadn't given her too much trouble before I arrived.

"I'm fine. What happened with your father?"

"I'll explain later. We don't have time to waste right now. We're leaving," I said, watching her eyes widen.

She hesitated to follow, throwing a glance toward the hall where her room was.

"I'm sorry there's no time to pack anything. Those guards will be back soon,"I said apologetically.

She paused. Raising her gaze to mine, she held it for a moment. "That's alright. There's nothing left for me in that room, anyway."

THERE WAS one more stop I needed to make before leaving. Leading Koraine, I guided her down the palace hall leading to my sister's room. It was a risk spending any more time than needed in the palace, but I wouldn't leave without asking my sister to join. We'd always looked out for each other over the years.

At the end of the hall where my sister's chambers were, I paused.

"Wait here," I said gently to Koraine. "If any of the guards approach, signal to me." She gave me a slight nod of understanding.

I wasn't as worried about the guards as I made it seem. I knew they wouldn't look here first for us. It was the truth about my mother I didn't want Koraine to hear yet. Nyla would need to hear it if I stood a chance convincing her to come, but part of me felt extremely vulnerable telling Koraine. I knew she deserved more than a rushed explanation. Especially since the king was planning the same fate for her.

Knocking on Nyla's door, my heart raced with every second that passed, and we were still within the confines of the palace walls. We'd managed to avoid the guards coming here, but I wasn't sure our luck would continue much longer.

"What is it?" Nyla asked, rubbing sleep from her eyes as she opened her door.

"We're leaving," I said.

"Leaving? What do you mean leaving? The wedding is in a few hours, Bellamy," my sister said, wide awake now.

"I mean exactly that. We're leaving Abelon, and I want you to come."

"Why? You can't just leave. Father would never allow it."

"He's why I'm leaving. He killed Mother, and he is going to kill Koraine if she stays," I said in a hushed tone.

"You sound crazy. Why would Father kill our mother? Morwen killed her during the war. Why are you acting like this, Bellamy? This isn't like you." Nyla's frown grew across her lips.

"We don't have time for this, Nyla. Let's go."

I wished I could explain better. If I had more time, I knew I could easily convince her, but what I was telling her was hard to believe. I still hadn't processed the full truth.

"I can't leave, Bellamy. Our lives are here. Our friends and family. We have a duty to Abelon!" Nyla shouted.

"Did you not hear what I said? He killed our mother!"

"I don't believe you," she said, her voice breaking. "He wouldn't do that! He loved her. All of Abelon loved her."

Heartbreak crept into her features.

"And that's why he did it. He needed Abelon's support for war. The only way to get it was to give them an enemy worth fighting. Morwen was the perfect target. Please, Nyla. Come with us. You aren't safe here."

"I can't! I won't," she insisted. "Stay, Bellamy. You must. If you leave, you'll be a traitor to our kingdom. They'll hunt you down. I don't know if even Father's mercy would be enough to save you. You're sentencing you and Koraine to death!"

"He already sentenced Koraine to death. I won't let that happen. I can't allow him to continue in power and I need support to overthrow him. I can't do that from here," I said.

"Please," she tried once more, tears filling her eyes.

If she wouldn't come, I couldn't force her. I would never take that decision from her. It broke my heart, but I knew I had to leave. Turning, I left my sister standing with tears streaking down her cheeks as she watched me leave our kingdom behind.

SILENTLY, Koraine and I made our way out of the palace without trouble. I parted the flames at the gate as we passed through. Heading into the city, I

could hear the shouts of the guards assembling back within the confines of the palace.

"There's somewhere I have to stop before we leave," I said, realizing I needed to speak with one more person before leaving Abelon.

"We don't have time. The king will have realized we've left by now, and he'll know we're going to Morwen. I don't want to be around when guards come searching the city," Koraine insisted.

"It will only take a moment, I promise."

I couldn't leave without making this one stop. Especially not if I was never coming back. They deserved to know why I'd disappeared.

Leading Koraine down the streets of Raden, I tried to remain unseen, avoiding any crowded routes. If people spotted us, it would be far too easy for the king to hunt us down.

Down every side street there were people wandering, enjoying the cool autumn weather and browsing the open shops. A few shops had stands set up of fresh fruits or pastries outside. The journey was taking longer than expected, trying to be cautious.

"Bellamy, we have to go," Koraine said, tugging back on my hand.

She was eyeing a street that led straight to the docks. I knew it would be easy enough to turn that direction and head for the empty ships I knew sat in the water there. We'd steal one, and begin our journey to Morwen before anyone noticed we were gone. Yet, I couldn't bring myself to go without this last stop.

"I promise we will make it out of Abelon. Do you trust me?"

She pondered my words, her brows pulling together. For a moment, I thought she may object, but instead she gave my hand a reassuring squeeze.

"I trust you," she answered.

Arriving at our destination, I quickly knocked on the door, hoping no one would turn down the street. Mariam's cheery face appeared as she pulled open the door. Spotting Koraine, her features lit up with delight. She ushered us inside, closing the door behind us.

"What are you doing here?" Mariam asked, turning to me. "Isn't today your wedding?"

"Not anymore," I admitted.

Her eyes widened. Realizing we weren't here for my usual friendly check in, Mariam ran to the window drawing closed the curtain.

"What happened?" she asked in a hushed tone.

"I don't have enough time to explain, but I have to leave Abelon and I'm not sure when I'll be back," I paused, letting my words sink in. Mariam gave me a nod of understanding. "I won't be able to bring food for a while, I'm so sorry."

I hated disappointing them. For years, I'd been helping the orphanage. They'd come to rely on me, and knowing I wouldn't be around for a while pained me to my core. The idea that some of these children would go hungry some days in my absence hurt more than I could explain.

"We understand," Mariam said gently, laying her hand on my shoulder. Her eyes were lined with tears. "Just be safe and come back some day."

"I will," I promised.

We needed to leave, time was already running out. My heart ached knowing I was leaving behind Mariam and the rest of the orphanage. Koraine placed a gentle and reassuring hand on my shoulder. She didn't have to say anything, I knew our time was up.

"There's a small fishing ship that docks on the furthest west dock and is rarely used," Mariam said. "Take that. They won't notice until you are long gone."

I gave Mariam a quick hug, whispering my thanks. Nodding to Koraine, we both turned for the door. Outside, we moved as fast as we could. I was holding Koraine's hand, tugging her along down the winding cobblestone streets. Many Abelonians gave us confused glances as we rushed past them. I hoped we hadn't gathered enough attention for the guards to come looking this direction.

We arrived at the docks and I was relieved to find the small fishing ship Mariam had mentioned was docked with no one around to notice as I began frantically untying the ropes holding it in place. Koraine watched nervously as I worked on the knots that kept the ship docked.

"Hey, stop right there!" a distant voice shouted.

As I looked up, I found three guards rushing toward us. They were still a bit away but my pace became frantic.

"Bellamy," Koraine warned, her voice weary. I risked another glance at the guards.

They were closer now, and one launched flames in our direction. Standing, I intercepted the flames, taming them before they could reach the ship. More balls of fire followed, aiming for our one way out of this kingdom.

Koraine took over trying to free the ship. Sending flames of my own back at the guards, I held them off.

"I got it," Koraine shouted, her voice sounding relieved.

"Let's go!"

Hopping over the edge of the ship, I offered Koraine a hand, helping her in. Already more guards made their way down the streets to the docks. Pushing away from the dock, I rushed to get the ship moving.

The guards were rapidly approaching, and I spotted one in particular that made my stomach sink. Cyrus was leading at least five more guards down the docks. Flames consumed his hands and he threw them in our direction.

Before I could react, Koraine manipulated the water into a large wave that doused the flames. It didn't stop there. The water barreled at the guards, knocking them down.

Koraine glanced over the ship's edge, and began manipulating the water around us. Quickly, the ship started moving away from the docks and out into the sea faster than any fisherman could've accomplished. It was the first time I'd ever felt thankful for a Morwenian's water control.

As we set sail, I turned back, glancing at my kingdom. I tried to take in every detail I could, unsure when, if ever, I would return. My eyes locked on Cyrus, standing drenched his stare promising no mercy if we ever met again. A smug grin stretched across my face knowing Koraine would be far from his reach.

Calling out to Imry, it took only minutes for the large beast to appear overhead.

Warily Koraine watched the dragon as she flew above us, following the ship.

"She won't hurt you," I assured her. "Imry only harms those I command her to. I would never allow her to so much as singe you."

Koraine gave me a half hearted nod. My words did not seem to do much to soothe her worries. I didn't blame her. When she'd arrived to Abelon, I had threatened her with the same beast. So much had changed over the months. I was now sailing to my enemies' shores to beg for help. Nervously, I peered over the edge of the ship at the water. I gave a silent prayer to the four goddesses that we would make it to Morwen unscathed.

KORAINE



few hours at sea and I couldn't help but feel a twinge of excitement in my stomach. I was going home. My life might be in danger, but the possibility of seeing my family helped steady my focus. We just had to reach the shores of Morwen and we'd be safe.

The only problem was, neither of us knew the exact route to the water kingdom.

I'd only ever sailed across the Vitrum Sea once, and it was the day I was sent to Abelon. The prince was out of his comfort already being surrounded by this much water. With no time to pack, we were stranded on the vessel with no food or map to guide us. I knew that we were heading in the general direction of Morwen, but without a map or the stars to guide us I wasn't sure where we would end up docking.

I'd discovered a blanket, a sack of gold coins, and a dagger stored in a bench built into the deck. My shoulders sagged and I sighed unable to find anything else of use.

Bellamy was pacing the length of the ship and had yet to say a word to me since we'd made it out to sea. The wound of leaving was still too fresh in his mind, so I didn't push.

Above us, Imry flew over the boat.

"Will she be able to fly straight through to Morwen?" I asked, interrupting the prince's pacing.

He paused, turning to me. With a short glance at his dragon, he started nodding.

"Imry is able to fly for long periods of time, but it will require a lot of rest once we've made it to Morwen. She will need to sleep for days before she is ready to fly again."

Talay had joined us shortly after our departure. Swimming beneath our ship, I couldn't see him, but I knew the beast was there.

Seconds soon turned to minutes and minutes to hours as we continued our journey with no end in sight. A few hours passed and my stomach pained from hunger.

Glancing over the edge of the boat, I felt sea sick as my empty stomach swayed with each wave we passed over. I tried to manipulate the water to reveal fish beneath us, but all I could sense was Talay, the fish steering clear of the giant beast.

I let out a sigh.

The prince was sitting on the ground beside me, staring at the wooden planks that made up the floor of the ship. He'd still barely spoken a word to me, and I was growing worried.

Using my abilities, I controlled the sea enough to form a small orb of water that I floated up to the boat. I let the orb splash against my face, feeling the cold water against my skin.

"Watch where you send that," the prince grumbled beneath me, small beads of water trickling down his face.

"Sorry, I'm just exhausted," I murmured.

"We both are," he snapped.

Bellamy's growing attitude soured my own mood. I knew he didn't mean anything by his tone, but he needed to understand I was also going through my own struggles. I had been ripped away from somewhere I was starting to believe was my home, the king was planning to kill me, and now I was a fugitive.

"Well, maybe if you'd let us pack a bit-" I started, but stopped when I saw the intense fire in the prince's eyes as his head snapped up.

"You think I wanted to strand us on this boat with nothing? I was trying to save your life!" Bellamy exploded.

"I know, I'm sorry," I sighed, sinking down to join him on the floor.

Grabbing his hand, I gave it a small comforting squeeze. It pained me to see the prince this distraught and be unable to help. I knew what it was like to be forced out of my kingdom and have a parent turn on you. Guilt washed over me for snapping at him. I should be thinking of ways to help, not making matters worse.

"We're both a little on edge right now," the prince admitted. "Come closer."

I slid myself closer to the prince, and he guided my hips to turn my body away from him. I could no longer see his face.

Suddenly, I felt his fingers running through my hair, the gentle tug as they got caught in some of my tangles. The feeling was euphoric as he played with the strands of my hair. Gathering it into his own hands, I felt him begin to braid it. Shock ran through me, impressed that he knew how to braid.

"Where did you learn to do that?" I asked, a smile returning to my face.

"My mother," Bellamy answered his words laced with sorrow.

"I'm sorry," I said, unsure what else I could say to comfort him.

"He killed her like he planned to do to you," the prince said distantly.

"What?" I asked, my heart racing.

"My father framed Morwen for my mother's death just to win over support to fight the war against your kingdom. It's why you didn't know about the queen's death. And it's why he was planning to do the exact same thing to you."

"I-" Nothing seemed good enough to say. My heart broke for the prince. "I'm so sorry," I managed to say, my eyes fell to the ground.

"I needed to get you out of that kingdom. No where would've been safe from him. I couldn't let what happened to her happen to you. I couldn't lose someone like that again." His voice grew frantic.

"Nyla wouldn't believe me," he said, his tone mournful. "She refused to come because she couldn't see past my father's lies."

"She'll come around," I began, turning to him.

"But will it be too late by then?" His gaze met mine, and I couldn't bring myself to lie to him. By the time we went back to Abelon with reinforcements, it would be days or weeks even. By then, the king could've manipulated Nyla to believe whatever he wanted and if she refused I didn't want to consider what measures he would take. "I just want to save my sister and protect my kingdom."

Behind the broken and divided flames of Abelon, I saw a prince desperate to save his people. To protect all the people he loved.

"We will save her," I promised. If it was the last thing I did, I would help Bellamy get Nyla out of Abelon. Help him show her the monster their father was. The prince finished braiding my long hair, and I tied it off with a small piece of string he found on the boat. Dropping the braid, I turned and slid my hand over his, giving it a slight squeeze.

The prince tipped my chin up. His gentle touch barely grazing my skin. Everywhere his skin met mine, I felt like little flames were spreading. Leaning in, he kissed me. It was a delicate kiss. The type one savors and hopes for more. If we were stuck at sea, at least I had the distraction of his lips on mine to pass the time. With the promise of death looming over us, I wouldn't waste another moment doubting my feelings for the prince.

WE FUCKED like the world was ending.

Our worlds we knew pretty much were, but I welcomed the distraction. The time at sea was brutal, our ship traveling slow without me constantly aiding it, and each hour the anticipation of reaching Morwen grew. We were drifting along hoping to spot land or some indication of where we were soon.

This was one of the few ways to pass time. Or at least I didn't care to think of any other ways. We'd been at it for at least an hour, and there was no end in sight.

The prince explored every inch of my body, leaving my core on fire and me aching for more. It distracted from everything else I felt.

He took his time pleasuring me. I felt as his tongue lightly graze over my nipples, causing them to harden. My back was pressed against the blanket we'd found, and the soft material made the deck more comfortable.

I hadn't pushed the prince to talk about his family or Abelon more, instead I'd allowed him to lose himself in everything I could offer him. If I could be the distraction he needed on this boat, then I'd spend every minute left at sea finding new ways to pleasure him.

As he moved his head to kiss me, I wrapped my legs around his torso. Pulling him in, I shifted my weight to flip him beneath me. I had him trapped under me, pinning him down.

"It's my turn," I said with a smirk. When he tried to protest, I stopped his words with a quick kiss.

Loosening his pants, I managed to slide them off. His hardened cock brushed against my thigh as I hovered over him. Moving myself down, I trailed kisses along his body. My mind was set, and I knew exactly how I wanted to spend our endless time at sea.

My mouth trailed up his cock, and it flinched in response to my touch.

"You don't have to-" the prince started, but immediately was consumed by a moan as my mouth sunk over him.

I continued to move my mouth up and down the shaft, taking care to add flicks of my tongue as I moved. I could feel Bellamy tensing with every teasing movement. His breathing intensified, and the blanket gathered in his fists as he tightened them.

I could feel the prince struggling to hold on, waiting to allow himself to finish. I wanted to make him feel as good as I had every time his tongue met my skin or his fingers danced along my core.

"Come here," Bellamy rasped, in a low tone. One that promised nothing but trouble.

I slowly made my way back to his mouth, kissing him passionately. His fingers tangled in my white hair.

"You are divine, my moon," Bellamy whispered.

"Moon?" I questioned, pulling back. I'd never heard him use the name before.

"If I am the burning sun, ruled by flames, then you are my moon, ruling over the tides and completing the missing half of me."

I melted at the sentiment. Without hesitating, I kissed him even harder than I had before, and I felt his small chuckle as I did.

My brain was swimming with thoughts. The endless possibilities of what could've happened had we not escaped. The fact that we would have been married by now if we stayed. Part of me was disappointed the wedding hadn't taken place. I found myself falling for the prince, harder than I could've ever imagined.

Bells rang in my mind like a melody playing over and over. For a moment, I wondered if I was just drunk on the pure bliss of being with Bellamy. As my tongue found its way into his mouth, the sound grew louder. I was lost in the hypnotizing sound of it. After a second, I pulled away from the prince, and listened.

Still hearing the bells, I realized they weren't in my head at all. They were ringing in the distance, the sound carried over the water.

"Do you hear that?" I asked. Bellamy paused, listening intensely.

"Bells?" he questioned.

"I think so," I agreed. Standing, I glanced across the water trying to track the sound. In the distance, through the mist hugging the water's surface I could just see the outline of what looked to be a town. "There's an island!"

Bellamy hurried to join me at the edge of the ship.

"Should we dock?" I asked with a grin.

THE ISLAND, we learned quickly was a small one shortly off the coast of Morwen. One of the men working the docks was kind enough to point us toward an inn. Come morning we'd make the remaining journey to Morwen.

Bellamy had sent Imry to find somewhere to rest on a smaller, abandoned island in the area. Talay would remain in the sea, nearby the coast of the island.

I was growing nervous by the minute. Finally, I was returning home, but what would I find when I got there?

Heading to the inn, I hoped that we'd find someone with a map. Even though we were close to Morwen, we still had a little way to sail, and I wanted to get there as fast as possible.

The inn was only a few minutes' walk from the docks, the island no bigger than an hour or two's walk across. I knew there were fishing towns built on islands like this near Morwen, but I'd never visited one before.

Entering the inn, the prince stood out amongst the people. His vibrant red clothing was not the traditional blue and muted tones that Morwenians wore. It wouldn't be long before someone questioned where we'd sailed from.

"Let me handle this," I said, afraid that Bellamy would attract too much attention. "Wait over there." I pointed to a seat in the corner of the inn.

Approaching the innkeeper, I stuck a sickly sweet smile on my face. The man behind the counter was plump and older. Dressed in navy blue clothing, he appeared to be Morwenian like everyone else I'd noticed on the island.

"I need one room for the night, please," I said, softening my features.

"Here," the man said, tossing a key at me barely lifting his eyes from the book he was reading. I slid a few gold coins I had in my pocket across the counter to him.

Signaling to the prince, I motioned for him to follow me to our room.

Walking down a long hall, I found the one that's number matched the number on our key. Opening the door, it led to a small, dark room. Only one bed sat against the far wall, barely large enough for two people. There was a fireplace and a door that led to a washroom. The room was sparse aside from the furniture, with no decor on the wooden walls.

"I suppose this will work," Bellamy said, walking in.

"Not what you're used to? Missing your fancy bed?" I teased.

"I don't need a large bed to make you never want to leave those sheets," Bellamy answered, his dark eyes falling on me and I blushed.

Making ourselves comfortable, we prepared to rest for the night. First thing in the morning, we'd board our boat again and finish our journey to Morwen.

After a quick dinner which we found served in the inn, we climbed into the tiny bed. My stomach was full from the meat and vegetables that I'd eaten far too quickly after having no food all day. I nestled myself against the prince unable to move much more. The bed was barely big enough to hold us, and one wrong move would land me on the floor. Wrapped in his warm arms, I allowed myself to close my eyes. Drifting to sleep, I tried not to let my mind wander to what would come once the sun rose.

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BELLAMY



It was hard to sleep on the small bed the inn provided. I tried to make myself more comfortable without waking Koraine, but after a few hours I gave up. Under the light of the moon slipping through the one window in the room, I pulled my arm out from under her. Slowly, I crawled out of the bed, taking care not to disturb her.

Keeping my steps light, I made my way to the door. One of the old wooden boards creaked beneath me, and I froze. Turning my gaze, I found Koraine still sound asleep. Her white hair shone even brighter in the moonlight. Words would not do her beauty justice.

As I stood there, I realized this was everything I had ever wanted. I may be on the run from my father, and our lives may be at risk, but I had *her*.

She was everything I wanted.

Needed.

Where I was rash, she kept a level head. Where I was lost, she seemed to know exactly what to do. Even at the orphanage, she'd been so gentle with the children. I'd never brought anyone there before or trusted anyone with my secret, but somehow I hadn't hesitated to bring her.

I finally reached the door, closing it gently behind me. I needed fresh air. I craved a ride on Imry to clear my head, but knew it wasn't possible. I settled for a walk along the streets of the island we were on.

The people living on the island weren't warriors and I wasn't worried I'd find any conflict. A few of the homes I passed still had candles lit in their windows. I heard the sound of a couple laughing, carried through an open window. The smell of the salty air wafted by, as I approached the water.

I let my feet guide me, wandering aimlessly. The water was only feet away, and I walked on a street parallel to it. Stopping, I watched the waves that brushed against the shore. Their rhythmic pattern was lulling. Picking up a stone, I tossed it across the water. It didn't skip across the surface, instead it sunk with a loud *clunk*.

"Here, let me," a voice said, startling me. Turning, I found Koraine with her hands on her hips, grinning at me.

"How'd you-"

"You're not as sneaky as you think," she scolded, shaking her head.

I should've known she wouldn't actually sleep through me leaving. She'd let me leave, following me. A little pride swelled in my chest knowing she was becoming more than capable of protecting herself. There would be many battles ahead, and not all of them were ones I could fight for her, but I knew she'd be able to handle them.

Finding another stone on the ground, I passed it to her. She traded me something she held in her other hand. Turning it in my hand, it was an apple.

"Your favorite," she said smiling. How she'd known I wasn't sure, but I took a large bite of the fruit. Savoring the tangy taste on my tongue, I took another bite.

"Thank you," I said.

Koraine weighed the stone in her hand for a moment, then flicked her wrist, letting it fly across the water's surface. It skipped a few times across the water before sinking beneath.

"You cheated," I accused, knowing she'd used her abilities to keep the stone above the surface.

"Maybe," she shrugged. "But it was still better than your measly attempt." Koraine winked at me.

"Why'd you follow me out here? Shouldn't you get rest before we leave for Morwen?" I asked, knowing the question was nonsensical as the words left my mouth.

"I suppose for the same reason you're out here. Couldn't sleep." She started following the shoreline, walking away. I followed her, knowing that rest was pointless. Both of us had too much plaguing our minds to sleep.

As we walked, a few stone homes and shops appeared along the way. The few people we passed gave us weary glances. I didn't blame them. The

world was constantly in turmoil, and these islands would be the first targets of other kingdoms looking to expand their territories.

One structure in particular caught my eye.

"Is that what I think it is?" I asked Koraine.

"I believe it is," she said, with a grin reading my thoughts.

"Shall we finish what we started?" I asked. As she nodded with a large smile, I grabbed her hand, leading the way.

THE NEXT DAY, we made fast time leaving after stocking a few more supplies in our boat. The innkeeper had given us a map detailing how to get to Morwen's capital from the island. It was less than an hour to sail, and we set out as the sun rose. Koraine seemed to be in good spirits, even though I saw the way she fidgeted when she thought I wasn't looking. She'd put on a brave face, but I knew she was worried about how we'd be received once we arrived.

Our boat drifted with the assistance of Koraine manipulating the water. With a clear direction, she helped guide the boat. I spotted a bulge in the water ahead before two horns poked just above the surface.

In the distance I saw the silhouette of a dragon, high in the clouds. The clear sky revealed its shape the closer it approached. Squinting at the direct sunlight, I realized it wasn't the familiar beast I'd hoped.

I grabbed Koraine's arm, pulling her down low against the rail of the boat.

"Stay low," I instructed, my eyes never leaving the distant beast.

It soon circled back the other direction, leaving our ship unharmed.

"What was that?" Koraine asked, glancing from the sky back to me.

"A scout," I grumbled.

"Why didn't they come for us?" Koraine's frown deepened.

"They will report back to my father first. We do not want to be out here when they do come," I answered, brushing a hand through my hair.

After an easy sail the remainder of the journey, I spotted the docks of the capital. Koraine directed the boat to float seamlessly to an empty one. Our ship hit the docks of Morwen and was greeted by a bunch of warriors. I hadn't noticed them before, but now there were at least five men blocking our path into the capital.

Our unmarked ship appeared an enemy vessel. Meeting Koraine's gaze, I knew she'd come to the same realization.

"Wait!" she shouted, hurrying over the ship's edge in front of me. "I'm Koraine Neroe, daughter of General Neroe," she explained with her hands raised.

I kept quiet. I suspected that my title would not earn me the trust we were seeking, it would only make things worse if they knew she traveled with the prince of Abelon.

"I need to speak with the king immediately," Koraine insisted.

The warriors looked at each other, pondering each of koraine's words and whether to take her to the king. One stepped forward, examining our ship and then us once more.

"We'll take you to the king," he drawled. "But I do not promise that he will give you an audience." The way he glanced past her at me made my arms prickle.

Koraine shrugged, as if that part didn't matter, getting to the palace was enough. When they learned of who I was, the king would want to see me personally regardless of the nature of the meeting.

The journey to the palace from the docks was short. There were large silver walls surrounding it, and as we approached gates creaked open ahead. The guards guided us inside the palace grounds. Inside, more guards joined them and we became surrounded.

They watched us intensely, making sure we didn't stray from the path and they never lessened. They led us to the throne room where I'd expected to find the king waiting.

Instead, the room held more warriors. They circled us, moving in slowly. We were about to become prisoners, if not worse. I lashed out with flames as a warrior moved toward me. I was met by multiple streams of water turning to ice as they hit me. I was frozen unable to move.

Panicked, Koraine lashed with her own water, but was unable to overwhelm this many trained warriors.

Falling to the ground, I watched as they bound our hands and ankles. I tried to fight against it, but the warriors beat me until my body felt heavy with pain.

"Why are you here?" a deep voice inquired. The warriors parted, allowing King Belizere to step through.

He hovered over me, studying me with his head tilted. The way his silver crown tipped forward I feared it would fall down onto me. Behind him a woman with dark hair stood, her eyes narrow.

"Perhaps some time in the dungeon will help them recall?" the woman said.

"No, please. Just listen," Koraine begged before a warrior gagged her.

"My daughter is correct, time in the dungeon should help clear your memory," the king drawled.

They carried Koraine out of the room first, and I struggled to hold my swollen eyes open when they came back for me.

KORAINE



ays went by before anyone would listen to me. Bellamy and I sat in the dungeon of the palace, the only time we saw anyone was when the king's warriors brought us food or water. My clothes were layered in a coat of dirt from the rough ground. The cell was made of stone and no windows.

I didn't dare try my water to break free. With the number of warriors around we would never make it far.

No matter how many times I told them who my father was, they wouldn't listen. They never spoke to us either.

Bellamy was in rough condition, bruises covering every visible part of his skin and dried blood caked to his clothing. He spent most of the days resting, waiting to regain his strength.

I spent my time banging on the cell door, demanding to see the king. It hadn't gotten me anywhere, but it did please me to see one of the warriors guarding our cell roll his eyes in annoyance. If I could bother them enough, maybe they'd finally acknowledge us.

"Why won't they take us back to the king, it's been days?" I asked for the hundredth time.

"They want us to know who holds the power here. I'm an enemy prince," Bellamy explained, as he had every day before.

"Tell my father, General Neroe, I'm home," I shouted.

A warrior rounded the corner, approaching our cell.

"Back up," he said, sternly. I moved away from the metal bars confining us. The guard unlocked the cell door.

Opening it, they bound our hands and blindfolded us.

Dragging us to another part of the palace, I struggled against the binds that held my wrists. I knew coming back and bringing Bellamy was a risk, but I hadn't expected to be treated like a traitor.

Thrown against the marble floor, I struggled to pick up my head. Glancing around frantically, I looked for Bellamy as my blindfold fell. I found him knocked out on the floor to my right. His face was swollen with more bruises, and his shirt torn apart. What had they done to him on the way here?

His scars were just visible from the holes in his plain white shirt. It made my heart pain for him. I knew what it meant for those to be exposed against his will.

I never should've brought him here. They'd kill him soon if I didn't do something.

"I want to see the king!" I demanded, my voice weak from the exhaustion of fighting for days to be heard.

"That won't be happening," Princess Asena's voice echoed across the space.

Walking over to us, her silver heels stood right beside my head. I tried to strain my neck to look up at her. She was sneering down at us. Using the water she manipulated from a fountain in the room, she sent a stream crawling toward Bellamy. The water climbed along his skin and soon his body was covered in a layer.

She started freezing his body slowly. If she covered his body in ice, he wouldn't survive long.

"Tell me why you came back," the princess demanded.

"To warn you," I answered. "Stop!" I shouted as ice continued to crawl up Bellamy's skin.

Ignoring me, she continued. "Why did you bring him here? Our greatest enemy!"

"I had no choice," I said, tears stinging my eyes as I watched the ice continue up Bellamy's legs. It would soon reach his torso. If it found his chest, his heart, he might not survive. "Please, just stop!"

"I don't believe you," the princess snarled. "I knew you were weak from the moment I saw you at that meeting. You never had what it takes to protect this kingdom. Your father will be so ashamed to learn his daughter is a traitor. Allowing our enemy into our kingdom. Walking them straight to our front door. It didn't even take you a year before you let them break you, use you. You're pathetic!" The princess kicked Bellamy in the chest, causing him to cough.

He still hadn't opened his eyes. I wanted to reach out to him. To grab hold of him and bring him back, but I couldn't.

"The king is planning to launch an attack on Morwen. He wanted to use me to influence our people to join him. He was going to kill me after the wedding and make it look like Luheo did it. We fled before the ceremony took place. He's trying to build up the fire kingdom, and gather as much land as he can!" I shouted, my eyes pleading with her.

"Even if this is true, why bring him with you if you are truly coming to warn us?" the princess questioned, her arms crossed and glaring down at me.

"Because..." I trailed off. If I told them the truth they may never believe a word I said. They might mark us both as traitors. "His father betrayed him too. He's promised to help us," I said, hoping it was enough to persuade the princess.

She kicked his limp body again. I flinched, watching as he groaned in pain.

"Stop!" I pleaded, my heart crumbling to pieces with each blow the prince endured.

Her ice climbed further up his body. I needed to do something, and fast.

"And he's my husband," I cried out.

"I thought the marriage never took place before you fled?"

"We stopped overnight at an island on our way here to get more supplies. A priestess there married us," I explained.

Finally, the ice stopped crawling up his skin. The princess glanced between us, pausing to think.

"I still don't trust that you are telling the whole truth, but if what you say is true, then we have preparations to make and he may have useful information."

I let out a breath of relief. This was the best I could hope for. Even if they took him prisoner, I would find a way to convince them to let him out.

The door to the room flew open, another person striding in. I struggled to prop myself into a seated position. Turning, I found the last person I was prepared to confront walking toward me.

"Father?" My pleadings with the warriors had worked and he'd come.

"You led them right to us," my father accused and my heart sunk. "About twenty ships have been spotted heading this direction. She's coming, and she's bringing a small army of warriors with her," my father explained.

"What do you mean she's coming? Who's coming?" I asked, tilting my head.

"The princess of Abelon is leading them, and she's sent a messenger ahead. Give her the prince, or watch Morwen burn."

To be continued...

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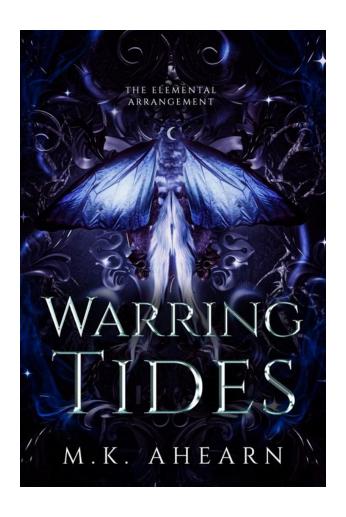
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WARRING TIDES



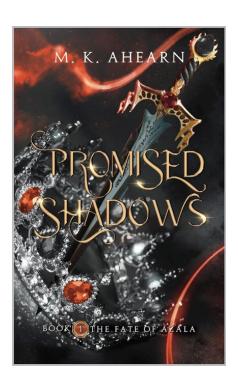


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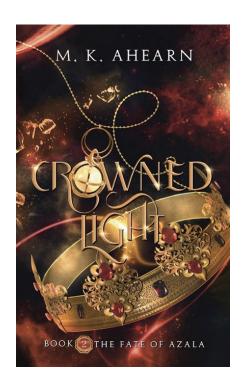
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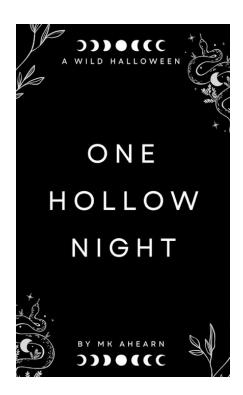
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